Pistol’s Two Bodies

Henry V at War

I have without good help danced myself out of the world.
—Will Kemp, Kemp’s Nine Days’ Wonder (1600)

Falstaff: Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!
Prince: I do. I will.
—William Shakespeare, The First Part of King Henry the Fourth (1598)

No one needs to ask what Laurence Olivier’s Henry V (1944) is all about. Whereas The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp seemed to have too much to say about its war, Henry V was immediately taken as successful and straightforward wartime entertainment. One of the most celebrated British films of the forties, Henry V satisfied audiences, critics, and even the prime minister because it appeared to suspend elegantly the difference between art and propaganda, between Britain’s long cultural history and its present experience of total war. Whereas Colonel Blimp seemed self-conscious, eccentric, or odd, Henry V just worked, giving the home front exactly what it seemed to want. That said, Henry V and Colonel Blimp continue to invite comparison and not simply because Olivier was Powell and Pressburger’s first choice to play Clive Candy. The films are both Technicolor spectacles, big productions that draw on early modern styles in order to evoke a simpler and more unified Britain; Colonel Blimp’s initial reliance on the look and style of a medieval tapestry returns in the self-consciously flat middle sections of Henry V, which Olivier modeled after the early fifteenth-century miniatures of the Limbourg brothers. Both films track the development of a protagonist from youth to maturity; where Clive makes his way from hotheaded youth to Blimpish maturity, the wise and sober King Henry is, as everyone knows, what a young and wild Prince Hal looks like all grown up and oats sown. Both films employ three-tiered narrative structures in order to manage their respective representations of history; Colonel Blimp
creates a fantastic and visually varied palimpsest out of 1942, 1918, and 1902, and Henry V offers a 1944 cinematic representation of a 1600 theatrical representation of a 1415 battle in three stylistically distinct and nested acts.

However, whereas Colonel Blimp faltered under the weight of its outsized complexity, Olivier’s Henry V was a critical because gently ideological triumph. James Agee wrote at the time:

Poem and film link the great past to the great present. It is unlikely that anything on the subject has been written to excel Shakespeare’s short study, in Henry V, of men stranded on the verge of death and disaster. The man who made this movie made it midway in England’s most terrible war, within the shadows of Dunkirk. In appearance and in most of what they say, the three soldiers with whom Henry talks on the eve of Agincourt might just as well be soldiers of World War II. No film of that war has yet said what they say so honestly or so well.1

The past and the present, old wars and new wars, soldiers on the fields of Agincourt and in “the shadows of Dunkirk”: whereas Colonel Blimp widened the gulf between an imagined British past and the real present of modern war, Henry V seemed—at least to the American Agee—to bring past and present fully and evocatively together. Whereas Powell and Pressburger’s film revealed fissures and contradictions within both modern British identity and the concept of total war, Olivier’s film seemed rather to clarify things, to know the difference between heroes and villains, and to cut through ethical fog of modern war. Henry V also did much—however obliquely—to imagine life after wartime. Whereas films like The Lion Has Wings (1939), Contraband (1940), 49th Parallel (1941), and Colonel Blimp thought from within the thick of things about why and how we fight, Henry V appeared when victory seemed more or less certain; it was indeed a film less of Dunkirk than of D-Day. What, it thus asked, should life be like after the violence, the social dislocations, and the real social promise of the war? What would happen when the warriors returned home?

Henry V approaches these ideas in different ways: it tries to see war as a sane experience that, after and against the hardened and maybe psychotic realpolitik of Colonel Blimp’s New Model Army, could work alongside traditional English virtues; its light handling of relations between different British ethnicities—Scottish, Welsh, and, to a lesser degree, Irish—supported other attempts both to contain and to transcend regional and socioeconomic particularity; and its awkward comic coda, featuring the light but forced banter between Henry and his French fiancé, Princess Katherine,
both raised key questions about the wartime and postwar experience of sex and gender and proleptically embodied a generic transition from the violent and uncertain middle space of history to the closural and thus conservative compensations of comedy.\textsuperscript{2} The critic Vincent Canby put matters simply: “Olivier’s \textit{Henry V} is a splendid film that is also splendid propaganda.”\textsuperscript{3}

That said, the film has had its detractors. While Agee saw the film as an honest and stirring confirmation of values that underwrote Britain’s conduct during the war, as truly good, which is to say ethical, propaganda, some later viewers have had a harder time accepting Olivier’s implicit view of the war, his apparently conservative hopes for British society, and what can seem like a baldly patriotic reading of Shakespeare’s play. For Martin Buzacott, Olivier is “the theatrical (and more successful) General Alexander Haig,” working in “a political and theatrical environment where truth is a casualty of credibility and rhetoric overcomes the limitations and contradictions of reality.”\textsuperscript{4} Graham Holderness argues that the film can’t sustain its initially critical analysis of war and at last accepts the ideological romance of the good fight: “The illusions of naturalism and of conventional theatre have succeeded in dominating the imagination: and through those illusions the film’s ideological integrity is reasserted.”\textsuperscript{5} Norman Rabkin writes that Olivier’s film “prettied up” Shakespeare’s ethically opaque play, reducing its essential ambivalence about war to a single, jingoistic slogan: “God for Harry, England, and Saint George!”\textsuperscript{6} Alan Stone argues that “Olivier’s \textit{Henry V} shows us a children’s make-believe war.” For Stone, writing in 2005, the example of Kenneth Branagh’s grittier, post-Falklands version coupled with the then fresh disaster of the Iraq War made it hard to take Olivier’s bucolic vision of war seriously; whereas Branagh and Shakespeare showed war as it was, Olivier offered disingenuous fairy tales.\textsuperscript{7} For viewers like Buzacott, Stone, Rabkin, and Holderness, the film fails because its need to make a particular case about and for a particular war overpowers its ability to do justice to the larger ethical and historical complexities of Shakespeare’s play. Whereas Agee and Canby saw the film as an inspired instance of what the Ministry of Information wanted from its strained and, as I have argued, avowedly oxymoronic ideal of a “democratic propaganda,” these writers see it as ideologically reductive: it was propaganda pure and simple.

Depending on whom you ask, Olivier’s \textit{Henry V} is thus either a great and honest film about war or the worst kind of cinematic warmongering. As it turns out, versions of this disagreement have characterized the reception of Shakespeare’s play since it first appeared. Based on the historical events that surround them, interpretations of the play drift back and forth between celebrations of its patriotism, condemnations of its bellicosity, and appre-
ciations of its ironic ambivalence. To begin at the beginning, Shakespeare’s first audiences would have been reminded—perhaps favorably—of the Earl of Essex, Robert Devereux’s doomed campaign to suppress Irish rebellion: “The period of the play’s composition must have coincided almost exactly with a period of great national enthusiasm for an expansionist military adventure, led by a young, flamboyant, and popular general.” Seen in that light, *Henry V* looks like war propaganda ab ovo; seen, however, in relation either to a public ambivalence about the Irish campaign that Joel Altman has described or, more obviously, to the 1601 execution of the then disgraced hero Essex, the play looks quite different. Later, in 1817 and the wake of Waterloo, William Hazlitt saw Shakespeare’s young king in terms of his abuse of the throne: “Because he did not know how to exercise the enormous power, which had just dropped into his hands, to any good purpose, he immediately undertook (a cheap and obvious resource of sovereignty) to do all the mischief he could.” In 1859, however, Charles Kean staged *Henry V* as a patriotic spectacle designed to mitigate the psychological effects of the Crimean War; while “the general feeling of the present day may be opposed to the evils of war,” Kean wrote in his production notes, “there are few amongst us who can be reminded of the military renown achieved by our ancestors on the fields of Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt, without a glow of patriotic enthusiasm.” In 1919 and the immediate wake of another war, Gerald Gould wrote: “None of Shakespeare’s plays is so persistently misunderstood as *Henry V*, and one is tempted to think that there is no play which is more important to understand. . . . The play is ironic: that is, I venture to think, a fact susceptible to detailed proof.” Gould’s proof of the play’s essential irony was, of course, to be found as much on the fields of Ypres, Verdun, and the Somme as in the play itself, a fact that anticipates Paul Fussell’s great argument about war and the invention of modernist irony in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. These are only a few examples of responses that can’t help but tack between the play’s two apparent and apparently immanent and inevitable extremes in order to meet the specific needs of their own times. It seems that every war will look for and find its own *Henry V*.

In the face of this vacillation, recent critics have sought to read the play as essentially doubled, as stretched between the poles of irony and sincerity, patriotism and critique, subversion and containment. In his 1977 essay, “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*,” Norman Rabkin argues that, like Wittgenstein’s famous gestalt figure that can look like either a rabbit or a duck but not both at once, *Henry V* is defined by two available but incommensurate interpretations, the “rabbit” of heroism, leadership, and the proper consoli-
dation of kingly authority and the “duck” of jingoism, political opportunism, and unjust war: “I want to show that Henry V is brilliantly capable of being read, fully and subtly, as each of the two parts of Henry IV has respectively anticipated. Leaving the theatre at the end of the first performance, some members of the audience knew that they had seen a rabbit, others a duck. Still others, and I would suggest that they were Shakespeare’s best audience, knew terrifyingly that they did not know what to think.”

Building explicitly on Rabkin’s analysis, C. L. Barber states, “We are either with him or against him, depending on whether or not we supply the dissenting or qualifying perspective.” Claire McEachern writes: “These two sides—the inspiring and the calculating—constitute the double face of Henry, but it is a duality that does not so much discredit his rulership as render it all the more compelling. He is both righteous and ruthless, glorious and repellent, and the combination serves to make him both difficult to grasp and a king for every moment.” For these critics, the play functions as a sort of inkblot, a test that allows different periods to see their own implicit assumptions about, hopes for, and fears of war reflected back at them.

Within this context, Rabkin takes Olivier’s film as a more or less crass attempt to steer an exhausted wartime audience toward a possibly therapeutic but nonetheless limited reading of the play: “To be sure, Olivier’s camera and Walton’s music prettied up the atmosphere, transporting their war-weary audience to the fairy tale world of the Duc de Berry.” Instead of showing audiences an irony that they needed to see, Olivier gave them what they wanted to see, a piece of make-believe that reduced war to something that could, in the end, make ethical sense. Olivier’s film, I maintain, is also less straightforward than either its critics or its admirers have suggested; in fact, it uses resources specific to cinematic style to confront both the rabbit and the duck of British political feeling during World War II. More to the point, Olivier’s cinematic management of Shakespeare’s play and, in particular, a structural relation between the heroic protagonist, Henry, and the minor comic grotesque, Ancient Pistol, helps to foreground a characterological ambivalence about war that shadows but does not at last undo Olivier’s commitment to the war as he found it. This complex and searching play of light and shadow makes Henry V an instance of “democratic propaganda,” which is to say a film that can imagine the real necessity of a war while nonetheless confronting the intractability of its political, aesthetic, and ethical contradictions. Put differently, rather than seeing Shakespeare’s play as a sterile or merely formal opposition between terms, Olivier uses, I maintain, its fundamental ambivalence to capture a necessary, practical, and strategic suspension that conditioned the British experience of war;
this is the larger ambivalence or contradiction embodied by the phrase, “it takes a fascist to fight a fascist.” Olivier’s film thus manages to capture a felt ambivalence, a strategic contradiction that helped however tenuously to give shape to the British experience of total mobilization and total war. Looking to the real historical force of that enabling contradiction, we will be able to say of Olivier’s film what Rabkin says of Shakespeare’s play: “The inscrutability of Henry V is the inscrutability of history.”

Mobilizing Shakespeare

Olivier’s film was of course just one part of a large and unsystematic wartime effort to use Shakespeare to connect the violence of the present with the experience of the past. Churchill made frequent reference to Shakespeare and to Henry V throughout the war and “was moved to ecstasies by a screening of Laurence Olivier’s [film] not least because he was in no doubt about who was playing the king’s part in England’s comparable mid-twentieth-century epic.” In Powell and Pressburger’s The Volunteer (1944), Ralph Richardson—playing himself—begins his story of the war reminiscing about how an announcement of the 1939 Nazi invasion of Poland abruptly ended his production of Othello, a turn of events that puts Shakespeare at the start and center of Britain’s war (Ernst Lubitsch’s To Be or Not to Be [1942] begins similarly, as the Nazi invasion of Poland brings a Warsaw production of Hamlet to a sudden halt). David Lean’s This Happy Breed (1944), a film about a salt-of-the-earth family making its way between the wars, takes its title from Richard II:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands,—  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

The critic G. Wilson Knight took the title of his strange Shakespearean pageant, This Sceptred Isle: Shakespeare’s Message for England at War (1940), from the same speech; mixing dramatic recitation and ideologically driven
analysis, Knight stitched together bits and pieces of Shakespeare’s text into a proleptic and patriotic response to the pressures of modern total war. Harder to pin down but no less suggestive was “Operation HK,” a secret plan to move the British government to Stratford-upon-Avon in case of an invasion. Simon Barker speculates that someone in some office might have hoped that Hitler’s well-known love for Shakespeare would prevent the city from being bombed; and, indeed, unlike London, Coventry, or Canterbury, Stratford made it through the war unscathed. Olivier himself wrote: “Looking back, I don’t think we could have won the war without ‘Once more unto the breach . . . ’ somewhere in our soldiers’ hearts.”

Scholarly readings of the Henriad also became more prominent and pointed during the war. After the spectacle of This Sceptered Isle, Knight published a short book, The Olive and the Sword (1944), in which he argued that Shakespeare’s plays both embodied English values under threat and somehow predicted England’s ultimate preservation of those values: “We need no Messiah, but we might, at this hour, turn to Shakespeare, a national prophet if ever there was one, concerned deeply with the royal soul of England.” Knight’s reading of Henry V is straightforwardly appreciative: “You can see how carefully Shakespeare is laboring to create in Henry a blend of Christian faith and martial heroism.” The book takes pains to account for and to motivate one of the most uncomfortable aspects of the Henriad: Henry’s brutal rejection of his friend and mentor Falstaff at the end of the second part of Henry IV. Henry needed Falstaff, Knight suggests, because Falstaff helped him to understand something natural and true about the English character; he also needed ultimately to reject Falstaff because what he represented had no place in war:

It is, I think a supreme stroke of Shakespeare to have apprenticed his hero-to-be, Henry V, to such a tutor as Falstaff: because within the very essence of the national temperament exists not only a sense of humor but a closely allied and deeply satiric sense of the futility of military ambition, as an end in itself: “There’s honor for you.” The more continental and Fascist Hotspur . . . seems trivial by comparison; though of course Hal must eventually prove himself the better soldier. This, too, has before now happened with Great Britain, as a nation.

Knight is explicit here: just as Henry somehow saves Falstaff and the values he represents in the very act of rejecting Falstaff, so does Britain need to suspend certain of its characteristic values (broad-mindedness, irony, fair play) so that those values might ultimately be saved. This, as we saw in the
case of Colonel Blimp, is the paradox of total war: faced with its possible destruction, a culture must be suspended so that a culture might be saved.

The tension felt in Knight between national security understood as a non-negotiable value and Falstaff’s wonderful freedom of expression, his willingness to speak difficult and unpatriotic truths about war in the midst of war, indeed recalled in more specific terms debates about propaganda, censorship, free expression and freedom of the press, and totalitarianism that had occupied British thinking since the passage of the Emergency Powers (Defence) Acts of 1939 and 1940. According to Mark Donnelly: “[The act of 1940] gave the state sweeping powers to do whatever it believed was necessary for the war effort. Internal security requirements and the material demand of war obviously meant an enhanced role for the state, but it should be acknowledged none the less that an immediate corollary of this was an erosion of civil liberties.”

Cutting to the chase, Marina MacKay writes that the act of 1940 “turned Britain into a totalitarian state.” Donnelly continues: “There was no question that the government had a duty to prevent the leakage of information to the enemy which might be of military value. The problem lay in interpreting this duty and defining the circumstances in which censorship could be justified, not least because of the way in which Britain’s war effort came to be portrayed as a defense of democratic values against totalitarianism.”

This tension between the liberty and censorship or democracy and totalitarianism was thus a pressing and obvious political problem from the war’s beginning. For instance, I’ve already quoted Churchill as he acknowledged on September 3, 1939, that it might “seem a paradox that a war undertaken in the name of liberty and right should require, as a necessary part of its processes, the surrender for some time of so many of the dearly valued liberties and rights.”

And on September 31, 1940, another member of the House wondered aloud if the Emergency Powers Act wouldn’t put the government in a “position by no means inferior, as regards the scope of powers over newspapers, to that occupied by the distinguished Dr. Goebbels in Germany.”

When, in that case, Knight and others returned to the conflict between Henry—a surrogate for martial law, moral hygiene, and national security—and “Plump Jack” Falstaff, a character best defined by his willingness ironically and excessively to utter and embody truths that went against the grain of those official values, they managed to find in Shakespeare the terms of a fraught and current debate about the practical demands of total war. It is indeed in just these terms that J. Dover Wilson’s The Fortunes of Falstaff (1943) worked to deflate the romantic myth of Falstaff embraced by earlier critics like William Hazlitt, Maurice Morgann, and A. C. Bradley: “It is they, and
not Shakespeare, who have been swept off their feet by Falstaff. Bewitched by the old rascal, they have contracted the disease of not listening to the play, even the malady of not marking all the actions he himself performs. No modern critic, as far as I know, has ever been to the trouble of furnishing a straightforward account either of the main features of Falstaff’s character or of what actually takes place in the comic under-plot; they have been too busy expressing their own sense of enjoyment and emancipation.”

Wilson celebrates the young king as “English Harry, in whose person Shakespeare crowns noblesse oblige, generosity and magnanimity, respect for law, and the selfless devotion to duty which comprise the traditional ideals of our public service.” Although there must remain a place for the “bliss of freedom” that Falstaff represents, the plays also reveal the need sometimes to limit that bliss in the name of security, a need once again revealed by contemporary “scenes on the battlefield before [the eyes] of the modern soldier, or bombs in the streets of London.” For both Knight and Wilson, the war helped to uncover what Hazlitt and Bradley had selfishly overlooked: the fact of an essentially Shakespearean, which is to say essentially English, commitment to security at the possible expense of liberty.

**The World Picture at War**

This focus on security and liberty is also an aspect of a pair of more considerable and influential wartime works, E. M. W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture* and his *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (first published in 1942 and 1944, respectively), books that offer an account of a highly structured belief system—a “world picture”—that Tillyard takes as characteristic of the Elizabethan frame of mind and that critics sometimes link directly to the look and themes of Olivier’s film. Graham Holderness is most explicit about Olivier’s at least ambient debt to Tillyard. He argues that, in identifying order and security as central Elizabethan and thus preeminently English values, Tillyard made possible a “remarkable logical slide from a description of Renaissance ideology to the celebration of an apparently immutable social and cultural entity called ‘England.’ . . . Without making any explicit acknowledgement of the fact that England of the Second World War is as much an object of address as that of the sixteenth century, Tillyard invokes and affirms values which were being assiduously—and much more openly—cultivated in the culture as a whole.” Although he admits that Olivier’s film is initially more complex, Holderness nonetheless sees Olivier as part of this larger ideological project: “The critical exigencies of the contemporary situation pull the film . . . into complicity with the ideologies of patriotism, war enthusiasm, and national unity.”
While Holderness’s sense that Tillyard and Olivier share points of reference is certainly right, it is not the case that Tillyard makes no “explicit acknowledgment” of his work’s dual historical address. Indeed, Tillyard makes the link between the distant political contexts of Elizabethan England and twentieth-century Britain as explicit as can be:

There is . . . no need to be ashamed of having an affection for Falstaff, as long as we acknowledge that we must also cast him out. The school of criticism that furnished him with a tender heart and condemned the Prince for brutality in turning him away was deluded. Its delusions will probably be accounted for, in later years, through the facts of history. The sense of security created in nineteenth-century England by the predominance of the British navy induced men to rate that very security too cheaply and to exalt the instinct of rebellion above its legitimate station. They forgot the threat of disorder which was ever present with the Elizabethans. Schooled by recent events we should have no difficulty now in taking Falstaff as the Elizabethans took him.35

What connects 1944 to 1600 and separates both from the false and decaying overconfidence of an equally imperial and romantic nineteenth century is, in other words, their shared insecurity, their related if historically distinct experiences of foreign wars as threats to national survival. I’ve already written about the degree to which Churchill and Powell and Pressburger cast World War II in terms of the “supreme emergency” and the possible death both of the state and of a civilizational project that the state represented. Tillyard’s implicit suggestion is that, just as the Spanish Armada threatened the existence of Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s England, so did the Nazis pose an existential threat to Britain, to Europe, and to all that for which they stood. As a result, while Britain in 1944 was closer in time to Victorian England, it was closer in both situation, character, and precarity to its more fragile Elizabethan counterpart. This comparison had, of course, already been given cinematic treatment in Alexander Korda’s 1937 propaganda feature, Fire Over England. Intended partly as a reaction to tepid British responses to Germany’s rearmament and Hitler’s rise to power, the film, which also starred Olivier, “made a fairly obvious equation between 16th century Spain and Nazi Germany, Philip II and Hitler and the Inquisition and the Gestapo.”36 Like Korda’s film, Tillyard’s argument depends on the idea that both periods inhabited states of emergency, times when, as we saw with Colonel Blimp, the old rules had to be suspended in order to paradoxically safeguard and preserve those same old rules.

We can see elements of Tillyard’s larger account of the Elizabethan
compromise between disorder and order in Olivier’s cinematography, his handling of character, and his casting. In the film’s second act, the world is rendered in the aesthetically compact style of a fifteenth-century miniature: its colors are exaggerated and sharply delineated; its presentation of architectural space is flat; its actors and objects are arranged vertically as if forced into a shallow, shared, and hierarchically significant two-dimensional space: “I decided to base the costumes and scenery very meticulously on medieval illustrations in storybooks, especially those of the Limbourg brothers, with their bright and pastel colors, prettiness, odd perspectives and, sometimes, no perspectives at all.”

The first shot in this section of the film seems governed by ideas that might have underwritten both Henry’s thoughts about kingly right and Shakespeare’s own ideas about power and history. As opposed to the bare look of the French court or the hurly-burly of the Globe Theater, the port of Southampton and fifteenth-century England as a whole are imagined as a vital, risky, but ultimately stable play of differences managed within the frame of a coherent and externalized conceptual scheme. The crowded, chaotic, but finally arranged look of the shot is an economical visual presentation of Tillyard’s world picture: “Here is a picture of immense and varied activity, constantly threatened with dissolution, and yet preserved from it by a superior unifying power.”

**Tillyard, Our Contemporary**

Of course, neither Tillyard nor Olivier is as straightforward as that. Although readings of Tillyard as conservative, reductive, and ideological are common enough, they tend to miss what’s most suggestive and difficult about his wartime analysis of English culture and history. While there is undoubtedly a conservative aspect to his thinking, his apparent nostalgia for the order of the Elizabethan age is in fact partial at best; instead of a panacea, his is indeed an anxious world picture of impending collapse in the face of a “bursting and pullulating world”: “the world they lived in was becoming ever more difficult to fit tidily into a rigid order: the mathematical detail of the correspondence became less and less apt; you could not base your faith on the endless accumulation of minutiae. At the same time the desire for order was there.” For Tillyard’s Elizabethans, order is what one wants but cannot have. As opposed to seeing order as an organic and safely Elizabethan value, Tillyard makes the case that whatever order governed the age was a fragile holdover from an earlier, less self-conscious time, a residual comfort almost wholly unsuited to the complexity of early modern life; “it was,” he says, “a simplified version of a much more complicated medieval picture.”
That earlier, “more complicated” culture was characterized by its dependence on the same elaborated residual system of rules and games at work in Powell and Pressburger’s *Colonel Blimp*: “One is tempted to call the medieval habit of life mathematical or to compare it with a gigantic game where everything is included and every act is conducted under the most complicated system of rules.”41 The Elizabethan age thus differs from what came before in both its relative simplicity and, paradoxically, its extreme fragility: “But though the general medieval picture of the world survived in outline into the Elizabethan age, its existence was by then precarious. There had been Machiavelli, to whom the idea of a universe divinely ordered throughout was repugnant, and in the seventeenth century men began to understand and heed and not merely to travesty and abuse him.”42 In other words, while the late medieval game somehow managed to keep life’s disorder in check, it had begun by Shakespeare’s time to run out of steam. In other words, although critics sometimes dismiss Tillyard because he seems motivated by an anachronistic and war-weary longing for an old order, his Elizabethan age was in fact not at all an age of unproblematic regularity and routine; it was rather an age of anxiety, self-consciousness, and paranoia. The Elizabethan world picture was not something Tillyard wanted for modern England; it was, rather, an early and telling anticipation of a darker contemporary logic:

Finally it must be confessed that to us the Elizabethan age is a very queer age. . . . Yet we shall err grievously if we do not take [its seriousness] into account or if we imagine that the Elizabethan habit of mind is done with once and for all. If we are sincere with ourselves we must know that we have that habit in our own bosoms somewhere, queer as it may seem. And, if we reflect on that habit, we may see that (in queerness though not in viciousness) it resembles certain trends of thought in central Europe, the ignoring of which by our scientifically minded intellectuals has helped not a little to bring the world into its present conflicts and distresses.43

The Elizabethan “habit of mind” is not, in that case, something that Tillyard hopes either to preserve or to resuscitate. Rather, he identifies the Elizabethans’ fraught preoccupation with structures, systems, and designs, on the one hand, with what Huizinga called “original violence” (“we have that habit in our own bosoms”) and, on the other, with the specific rise of central European totalitarianism. As opposed to a medieval condition in which layers of order emerge organically as an effect of an elaborate and ridiculous but nonetheless productive game, a game designed to do its best
with what it saw as an inevitable and natural *disorder*, the less ingenuous Elizabethan embraces order as what he or she knew to be a false consolation, seeking disastrously to remake the world in its ersatz image. If, in other words, the tension between Falstaff and Henry can be understood in terms of a shifting tension between freedom and security, Tillyard’s account reveals a problem or, rather, a familiar paradox. On the one hand, he sees that a romantic over-investment in rebellion for its own sake has no place in wartime. Just as Henry had to leave Falstaff and the Boar’s Head behind in order to rule, Britain needed now to grow up and face facts in order to fight a war that needed to be won. On the other hand, a world without Falstaff (or, for that matter, a world without Clive Candy) is exactly what England was fighting against. Whereas Knight proposed that Henry’s rejection of Falstaff amounted to a neat sublation of rebellion into a more capacious kingly authority, Tillyard writes himself self-consciously into a corner; that is not to say that he is in bad faith. Rather—as with Powell and Pressburger and, I maintain, Olivier—Tillyard ends up articulating a contradiction necessary to the democratic commitment to total mobilization. In order to save Falstaff, we have to kill Falstaff. In order to be free, we must renounce freedom. In order to defeat totalitarianism, we must become totalitarian. It takes a fascist to fight a fascist.44

**The Paradox of the Actor**

When we first encounter Olivier, he is an actor playing an actor who is, in turn, preparing to play Henry amidst genial disorder backstage. A quiet cough calls our attention to the nervous, all-too-human presence of the performer moments before he moves on stage to become a king. In this first section of the film, Olivier’s actor is heavily and sort of cheaply made up, a fact brought into relief by the presence of boy actors shaving and adjusting their wigs, rouge, and prosthetics in order to play Mistress Quickly and Princess Katherine. When, however, Olivier’s actor crosses the threshold between backstage and stage, the transformation is complete: his Henry is handsome, upright, and supremely confident. The crowd responds accordingly, applauding him as he makes his way center stage to utter his first line: “Where is my gracious Lord of Canterbury?”45 The camera remains backstage for a few moments to foreground the threshold between actor and character, person and king. Olivier was later explicit about the transformative significance of this sequence: “Henry, historically and in Shakespeare’s eyes, had an unheroic beginning, so I would start with me, the Elizabethan actor playing Henry, waiting in the wings, while the audience got to know the other characters.”46
"Where is my gracious Lord of Canterbury?"
Olivier understood this effort both to transform actor and character and to dramatize the moment of that transformation as essential to his direction of *Henry V*: “If Shakespeare has a flourish and a big speech, bring the camera back; if he has moments of humor and poignancy, bring it forward. I first tested this out in *Henry V.* [When] I wanted a big climax . . . I crept the camera back and back until [I delivered a line] in a full theatrical climax which, to my utmost delight, I saw the camera could take.” In order to fashion a synthesis between stage and screen acting, Olivier developed a hybrid method that would allow him to drift between states of interiority and exteriority, a mobile style he saw as his signature contribution to the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare. This tracking style is at work in Henry’s first big speech of the film, his reaction to the Dauphin’s mocking gift of tennis balls. The sequence begins with a close-up shot of Henry’s face; he smiles barely, subtly in a way that could only be captured in a close-up. As the smile fades, several things become clear: the king, for a moment, considers the joke from the perspective of his old, antic self and has at least grudgingly to smile; at the same time, the quick suppression of the smile is evidence of an effort not to reveal too much to the Dauphin’s emissary; then, the turn of smile to frown suggests that he feels at least some of the insult’s sting; and, last but not least, the self-possession that stands behind both smile and frown is proof of some colder strategic satisfaction. The feckless Dauphin has given Henry just what he wanted: a political excuse to go to war.

Because these several overlapping registers of the look would not have been available on stage, the cinematic close-up allows Olivier to pack these different registers into a single, restrained gesture. As, however, he speaks, his volume increases and the camera tracks back, giving him room to become more and more theatrical, to inhabit and to fill the stage; it does not stop until the details of Henry’s face can no longer be made out clearly. As Olivier’s shooting script puts it, “track back to show all the stage.” This shift from a close-up of a face to a long-distance shot of a whole stage is not only a move from one mode to another, from the specificity of the cinematic close-up to an effect more appropriate to the stage; it is also a shift from the suggested interiority of that almost imperceptible smile to the broad public exteriority of the stage speech. Olivier thus creates a continuum between styles that would otherwise seem opposed.

Olivier uses this same trick twice more, first with Henry’s “Once more unto the breach” speech and later with the “Band of brothers” speech. In each case, the camera pulls not only back but also back and up, tracking above Olivier and the other actors in a way that both allows us to see Henry emerge as structural focus of a much larger group and lends the camera
“I crept the camera back and back...”
a conspicuous objectivity, a god’s-eye or sovereign point of view that also seamlessly links the biographical and emotional particularity of Henry’s adventure with the larger stakes of world history. What Olivier’s cinematic and Henry’s political achievements represent is thus a sovereign synthesis of both public and private political spectacle and realpolitik, biography and history, real man and state symbol.

This synthesis is brought to a finer point with Henry’s famous night-time soliloquy; making his way through the camp incognito, Henry speaks with a few ordinary soldiers, an experience that gives him insight into the local and personal effects of war and encourages him to meditate on the inevitable loneliness of a king. In a manner more or less impossible in the theater but entirely natural to the cinema, Olivier converts the stagiest of dramatic conceits—the soliloquy—into an utterly convincing display of almost novelistic psychological realism. For three full minutes, the camera tracks slowly in toward Henry’s almost still face as we listen to him ruminate in voiceover on the uneasiness of the head that wears the crown: “What infinite heartsease / Must kings forgo that private men enjoy!” The nuances of the speech are accented with tiny shifts in Olivier’s eyes as they appear both half shadowed and sparkling by the light of the campfire.

Olivier thus uses specifically cinematic effects in order to offer the transformation of actor into character, exterior into interior, public into private as an allegory for what Ernst Kantorowicz famously referred to as the king’s two bodies, the idea that the king brought together in one person

“What must kings forgo?”
the mortal and fallible body of the natural man and a sacred and eternal body politic. Eric Santner summarizes the argument: “Kantorowicz shows that this complex set of linkages was largely, if often unstably, secured by the peculiar doctrine that the royal personage had two bodies, one natural and subject to the fate of all mortal flesh and one supernatural, whose representational or official corporeality gave quasi-divine legitimacy, presence, and enduring substance to governmental authority across the succession of generations.” The film thus aligns a few versions of this same logic: the passage from actor to character, the synthesis of the sacred and profane bodies of the sovereign, the biographical passage from dissolute youth to disciplined maturity, and the ideological and developmental resolution of the narrative tension between two of the Henriad’s other representative bodies: the grossly present body of Falstaff and the ascetic, fading body of Henry IV. Henry’s more or less successful synthesis of these alternatives offered Shakespeare a way to solve a structural problem that dogged the whole of the Henriad, beginning with Richard II: for Richard, “the Universal called ‘Kingship’ begins to disintegrate; its transcendental ‘Reality,’ its objective truth and god-like existence, so brilliant shortly before, pales into a nothing, a nomen. And the remaining half-reality resembles a state of amnesia or sleep,” a state that Henry prophylactically invokes and dispels in his own nocturnal meditation on sovereignty and war: “O hard condition, / Twin-born with greatness.”

However, we also need to see Olivier’s film as something more than an essay on early modern political theology; it was, as Olivier and others have understood, a rigorously contemporary propaganda film, an effort to imagine and to embody the stakes of modern world war and the possibility of political and cultural consensus in the wake of total mobilization. Although the film pursues this in a number of ways (its late turn to the marriage plot, its tacit rejection of Falstaff and the lively disorder he represents, its management of different regional identities with Captains Jamy, Fluellen, MacMorris, and Gower), its most persuasive argument comes with Henry himself, or rather with the figure that emerges from the formal and historical synthesis of the early modern actor, the earlier modern king, and the modern movie star. Although he would become more and more of a character actor, Olivier was a bona fide star in 1944. The Los Angeles Times loved him; the New York Times called him “one of those once in a lifetime things”; and Hedda Hopper wrote, “When Laurence Olivier says, ‘Come here, you’re mine,’ how gladly you’d go.” By 1944 he had appeared as Maxim de Winter in Hitchcock’s Rebecca, as Mr. Darcy in Robert Leonard’s Pride and Prejudice, and Lord Nelson in Alexander Korda’s That Hamilton Woman, and,
most famously, as Heathcliff in William Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights*, roles that made him into “a Hollywood star of the first rank.”

In Britain, Olivier was even more recognizable, making uncredited and cameo appearances in several important wartime films. He appears as himself pulling faces through a window in Powell and Pressburger’s *The Volunteer* (1944); he provides the introductory voiceover for David Lean’s *This Happy Breed* (1944); and, wonderfully and weirdly against type, he plays Johnny, the heroic French Canadian trapper in *49th Parallel* (1941). While serving as a pilot for the Fleet Air Arm of the British Navy, he starred in propaganda shorts, gave patriotic speeches to the troops, and delivered hours of patriotic radio broadcasts that self-consciously blurred the already thin line between Shakespearean and Churchillian rhetoric: “We will attack; we will smite our foes; we will conquer; and in all our deeds, in this land and in other lands, from this hour on, our watchwords will be: urgency, speed, courage.”

As Holderness puts it, “Olivier’s role in *Henry V* was indistinguishable (apart from the uniform) from his real-life role as a patriotic orator, a Churchillian inspiration to the Home front.” The film’s larger achievement as propaganda appears, as it were, fully formed in Henry’s first appearance onstage and onscreen; it pursues, in other words, the idea that Olivier, the actor Olivier played, and the king that actor played while Olivier played him could come together as a Tillyardian microcosm for the state, a state that in turn stands as an ordered and aspirational surrogate for both the requirements of total mobilization and the promise of postwar consensus.

**The Game Is Up!**

Olivier signals his interest in the Tillyardian tension between rules and rule-breaking, order and disorder with games that others play and that Henry more or less rejects. (This is another way in which *Henry V* recalls moves made in *Colonel Blimp*.) For instance, our first view of the court of the French King, Charles VI, is presented as a static tableau. Overall, the shot conveys a feeling of dreamy listlessness which again adopts the style of the Linbourg brothers but without the compressed vitality that animated the earlier image of the English embarking at Southampton. Olivier orders the space within a pronounced but subtly crazy visual field: at first glance, the court seems organized into a series of parallel visual planes, each divided from the others by a row of delicately ornate columns; a closer look reveals, however, lines and angles that don’t quite add up, an effect that turns architectural perspective against itself in the style of Escher or Piranesi. With this, Olivier both exploits a tension between “mathematical exactitude” and “human contingency” that Erwin Panofsky takes as essen-
tial to “perspective as a symbolic form” and reveals the French court as a structure on the verge of collapse, as a visual and, as it were, ethical system caught on the edge of its fall into the involutions of the Baroque.57

The mad king sits on the floor—lost, abject, terrified—while his advisors stand about the room, loitering, looking out windows, waiting for something to happen. At the shot’s center, the Duke of Orleans stands, idly playing a solitary game of cup-and-ball or bilboquet. The Duke’s game does a few things for Henry V. It adds to the languor that Olivier wants generally to convey; in addition to the game—it is a boring way to combat boredom—and the squatting king, we see guards lying prone around the edge of the frame, symbols of France’s unwitting unpreparedness in the face of Henry’s mobile English threat. The game’s status as a pastime also suggests that the French inhabit a different and stalled temporality, a time that has more or less fallen out of the shared flow of European and world history. Indeed, bilboquet had long been associated with the failure of kings, appearing both in accounts of the sixteenth-century court of Henry III (“He took a fancy to bilboquet, or cup-and-ball, and never went anywhere without one.”) and in War and Peace, where Tolstoy draws attention to its unmotivated presence in a portrait of Napoleon’s infant son: “A quiet handsome curly-headed boy with a gaze resembling the gaze of Christ in the Sistine Madonna was depicted playing bilboquet. . . . It was not entirely clear precisely what the painter meant to express by presenting the so-called king of Rome skewering the terrestrial globe with a stick, but the allegory, to all those who had seen the picture in Paris, and to Napoleon himself, obviously seemed clear and quite pleasing.”58 The stylized look, the languorous pace, and the general oddity of the scene in the French court suggests that the whole of fifteenth-century France is also a game, a self-contained and merely coherent hobby on the verge of being rendered obsolete by the onward rush of Henry’s tactical modernity.

The Duke’s game of cup-and-ball also recalls the mocking tennis balls that the Dauphin sends to Henry at the beginning of the film. For the Dauphin, the joke was meant to end an argument, to acknowledge, with a certain biting but nonetheless managed wit, the young king’s lack of gravitas and capacity and thus to cow him into submission. Henry, however, refuses the joke as joke:

And tell the pleasant Prince, this mock of his
Hath turned these balls to gun-stones, and his soul
Shall stand sore-charged for the wasteful vengeance
That shall fly from them: for many a thousand widows
Shall this mock mock out of they dear husbands,
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down:
Ay, some are yet ungotten and unborn
that shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s scorn.⁵⁹

The Dauphin’s teasing gag indeed recalls Clive’s playful effort to irritate Kaunitz with music at the Cafe Hohenzollern; and, like Henry, Kaunitz refuses to play and instead mocks the game itself: “You should have thought of that before you started your little joke!”⁶⁰ Henry thus pulls back the veil from the Dauphin’s civilized figural aggression to reveal and, indeed, to revel in aggression in and of itself. Whereas the Dauphin meant for his tennis balls to imply or to figure some other insulting thing, Henry chooses a vulgar if eloquent candor: a cannon ball is a cannon ball is a cannon ball.

Holinshed’s 1587 account of the gift (on which Shakespeare drew for his play) accentuates Henry’s refusal of diplomacy as a form of play:

Whilst in the Lente season the Kyng laye at Kenilworth, there came to him from Charles, Dolphin of Fraunce, the Frenche King’s eldest sonne, certayne Ambassadours, that broughte with them a barrell of Paris balles, which they presented to hym for a token from their maister, whiche presente was taken in verie ill parte, as sent in scorne, to signifie that it was more mete for the King to passe the tyme with suche childish exercise, than to attempte anye worthy exployte: wherefore the Kyng wrote to hym, that ere ought long, hee
woulde sende to hym some London balles, that should breake and batter
downe the roofes of his houses about hys eares.61

Instead of responding to the Dauphin’s code with another code (the art of
diplomacy), Henry mocks mockery itself, suggesting that the diplomatic and
social rules that underwrite the Dauphin’s playful attack no longer obtain;
a knowing inversion of the child’s claim that “sticks and stones will break
my bones,” Henry promises to meet the Dauphin’s “Paris balls” with the
literal destructive force of cannon shot. War and its implements will “mock
mock” out of him.

This denial of war as game is reinforced when, during the siege of Har-
fleur, Captains Fluellen, Jamy, Gower, and MacMorris meet to discuss the
war. While Fluellen, “the fussy Welsh pedant,” wants to assess matters in
terms of “the true, Roman disciplines of war,” in terms, that is, of war un-
derstood as a theoretical pursuit, an exasperated MacMorris cries out that
“this is no time to discourse, so God save me!”62 On the one hand, Fluellen
appears in both the play and the film as especially capable; on the other
hand, MacMorris has a point: under this king, war isn’t a matter of theory
or discourse. Indeed, as the captains sit “discoursing,” the king delivers his
all-too-real ultimatum to the governor of Harfleur: “How yet resolves the
Governor of the town? This is the latest parley we’ll admit.” If that seems
benign as ultimatums go, that is because it is one of several scenes that Oliv-
ier cut back to avoid confusing or disturbing his audience. In Shakespeare,
the king warns that without surrender, Harfleur will see:

The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls;
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
While the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds.65

In a way that both recalls and prefigures the effective and amoral intensity
of Colonel Blimp’s Spud, Henry threatens to lay waste to the city, to brain
the elderly, to rape the women, and to murder and defile the children; he
threatens, in other words, to make his war like what Spud understood as
“the real thing.” Showing that he is willing to push war to and past the
limits of the accepted “disciplines of war,” Henry lets Harfleur know he isn’t
playing around.
It is in that case telling that, as Henry threatens Harfleur, his captains sit over a tabletop war game, a simulation made up of blue and red pieces standing in for troops and fortifications. Seen against the barely suppressed image of women raped, old men beaten, and infants staked, the anodyne and fussy abstraction of Fluellen’s game seems hopelessly naive, as much an artifact from another age as the Duke of Orleans’s lazy game of cup-and-ball. Seen in relation to 1415, 1600, or 1944, Fluellen’s game is an anachronism. Although war games are as old as war itself, the tabletop simulation that occupies Fluellen was a more recent invention, appearing well after the play’s early modern setting and context. The most famous of these table war games was the Kriegsspiel (war game) cabinet that Georg Leopold von Reisswitz designed for Kaiser Wilhelm in 1812: “the Kriegsspiel established conventions of war gaming, such as identifying opponents as red and blue, the use of maps and umpires, and fundamental rules for movement and combat resolution.”64 If, however, Fluellen’s game would have seemed impossibly avant-garde in either 1415 or 1600, such simulations had come to seem old-fashioned by 1944. Although strategic models were in fact used in the lead-up to and during World War II (particularly by the Germans prior to the successful invasion of France in 1940), they had begun to seem at least symbolically inadequate to the political and operational realities of war:

It seems probable that both tactical and strategic ideas flourished in Britain in the 1920s for two main reasons: there was considerable public impetus
behind the writers’ concern to analyze and profit from the painful experience of 1914–1918; and the absence of an immediate obvious enemy provided a comparatively relaxed atmosphere in which theories could be developed in a quasiscientific way. A marked contrast existed between the unspecific “Redland versus Blueland” exercises of the 1920s and the practical realities that became all too apparent when likely enemies appeared after 1933.

Although strategically useful, the war game had—like the duel—lost its ability to represent war over the course of the twentieth century. In his *Little Wars* (1913), H. G. Wells had already imagined a war game (his is played with toy soldiers and miniature cannons) not as practice for but rather as an ironic and critical alternative to war: “How much better is this amiable miniature than the Real Thing! Here is a homeopathic remedy for the imaginative strategist. Here is the premeditation, the thrill, the strain of accumulating victory or disaster—and no smashed nor sanguinary bodies, no shattered fine buildings nor devastated country sides, no petty cruelties, none of that awful universal boredom and embitterment, that tiresome delay or stoppage or embarrassment of every gracious, bold, sweet, and charming thing, that we who are old enough to remember a real modern war know to be the reality of belligerence.” Fluellen’s abstract interest in “fighting wars out of books” thus puts him at odds both with the martial realism of Henry’s French campaign and with the unruly facts of war in 1944, facts that had revealed war games as either an inadequate representation of or a naive alternative to the real violence of modern warfare.

Olivier indeed takes care to present Henry’s army as especially and pre-sciently modern: as opposed to the heavily encumbered French, his army of lightly clad bowmen is quick, mobile, and ruthless. This depiction of the English at Agincourt has some basis in fact. As John Keegan writes, “The bowmen of Henry’s army were not only tough professional soldiers. There is also evidence that many had enlisted in the first place to avoid punishment for civil acts of violence, including murder.” Keegan goes on to argue that the weight of the French armor combined with muddy conditions allowed the English archers to corral the French, producing a series of highly efficient “killing zones”: “If the archers were now able to reproduce along the flanks of the French mass the same ‘tumbling effect’ which had encumbered its front, its destruction must have been imminent. For most death in battle takes place within well-defined and fairly narrow ‘killing zones,’ of which the ‘no-man’s-land’ of trench warfare is the best known and most comprehensible example.” More to the point, the improvisatory lightness and mobility of Olivier’s archers was meant to conjure the very modern warriors to whom
Olivier explicitly dedicated his film, the “Commandos and Airborne Troops of Great Britain.” As I pointed out in the introduction, the commando was a figure of considerable ambivalence during and after World War II, provoking “apprehension as well as respect. He was brave and skilled, but his style of fighting was unsportsmanlike, ‘dirty,’ suspiciously un-English. The name connoted a flirtation with illegality, an impatience with mere rules, a willingness to mete out justice with direct action regardless of the methods employed. The commando was a bit of a brute. He brought gangster values to the battlefield.”70 (Once again, we’re reminded of Colonel Blimp: “Get out of here, sir, you and your gang of awful militia gangsters!”) The commando represented a relation to warfare that worked because it refused to recognize the rules of the game. As a result, Olivier’s conscious invocation of the commando would cut in two directions or, rather, would once again help to reveal a difficult tension at the heart of thinking about war.

**Banish Plump Jack**

The Henriad’s most important figure of games, play, and their disputed ability to manage life is of course Falstaff. As David Wiles and many others have pointed out, “Falstaff is like a Lord of Misrule, a personification of Shrovetide or summer, who has the power temporarily to halt the normal progress of the calendar.”71 After more or less starring in both parts of *Henry IV* and having become one of Shakespeare’s most popular creations, Falstaff did not appear in *Henry V*, having died, we’re told, of a broken heart between the end of 2 *Henry IV* and the beginning of *Henry V*. This unexpected absence would have been all the more noticeable and upsetting to early modern audiences given Shakespeare’s promise at the end of 2 *Henry IV* that Plump Jack would in fact return: “If you be not too much cloyed with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France.”72 Why, then, doesn’t Falstaff return? Why does Shakespeare kill him off in the nonspace between plays?

Some critics answer the question in practical terms: perhaps Falstaff was left out because Shakespeare had said all he could with the character; or because Will Kemp, the actor who played Falstaff, had left the Chamberlain’s Men; or because Shakespeare was inching in 1599 toward a more naturalistic style that had less room for the traditional figure of the Vice or the clown.73 Other accounts of the play turn rather on the meaning of Falstaff’s disappearance. “What,” A. C. Bradley asks in his great essay on Falstaff, “do we feel, and what are we meant to feel, as we witness this rejection? And what does our feeling imply as to the characters of Falstaff and the new
Does Hal truly regret the loss of his old mentor or was rejection always part of his plan? Is Falstaff’s eleventh-hour declaration of love—“my Jove!”—proof of his sincerity or is it rather evidence of his innate, do-or-die duplicity?

Wartime readers of the Henriad took, as we have seen, this aspect of the plays as especially significant and made a special point of disparaging Falstaff, his origin, and his motives. Knight remarks that Falstaff “grows out of his setting of noble rivalries and military prowess like a vast green cabbage.” Near the end of The Fortunes of Falstaff, Wilson writes, “If my readers have followed me to this point they will, I think, be prepared to agree that the rejection has become inevitable.” And Tillyard admits, “There is thus no need to be ashamed of having affection for Falstaff, as long as we acknowledge that we must also cast him out.” As opposed to what they understand as the falsely romantic nostalgia of Hazlitt, Morgann, and Bradley, these wartime critics accentuate the venal aspects of Falstaff’s character to account for what emerges as the only apparent brutality of Hal’s rejection; and each casts his own critical rejection of Falstaff explicitly in terms of the immediate context of the war and total mobilization. Wilson calls efforts to imagine a more glorious military career for a younger Falstaff wishful thinking: an “‘old soldier’ is not the same as [a] ‘good soldier’; and the attempt of Morgann and others to make out Falstaff to be a warrior who had for years enjoyed a considerable military reputation rests upon a number of mistaken notions.”

We can see what’s at stake here: if one good soldier can turn bad, can repudiate “all heroisms,” what’s to stop any or every soldier from doing so, particularly when reeling under the pressure of combat, the threat of invasion, aerial bombing, and systematic deprivation? In these terms, a complex Falstaff, a Falstaff both a little good and a little bad, could reveal dangerous limits within the logic of total mobilization. What would happen to the war—to any war—if soldiers were allowed to ask Falstaff’s great and ironic question from the first part of Henry IV, “What is that word honor?” It is, we know, essential to the nature of irony to refuse totalization, to stand against the idea that either any concept or state could be autonomously true or good; it is for this reason that the presence and the example of Falstaff posed a threat both to Henry’s status as sovereign and to a war effort dependent on accepting totality as a lived condition.

**Banish All the World**

It is striking, in that case, that Olivier chooses—whereas Shakespeare didn’t—to feature Falstaff in his film, filming a death scene that the play
alludes to but does not in fact show. Falstaff’s death is shot in a naturalistic, immersive style that anticipates the film’s third act and the Battle of Agincourt itself. Indeed, the way in which this section of the film plays with chiaroscuro effects, groups its figures within a compressed but no less natural space, and highlights individual and *almost* exaggerated details of wardrobe and face seems to move from the lightly architectural perspective of the Limbourg brothers to tactile, foregrounded, and luminous obscurity of Rembrandt’s late style. The camera tracks in past an iconic Boar’s Head Inn sign into a window at the top of the house, where an old man lies prone, attended by Mistress Quickly and a single candle (the tracking shot in toward dim light emanating from the lone upper-story window is another possible nod to the opening of *Citizen Kane*, a connection that will come full circle with Welles’s 1965 version of the whole Henriad, *Chimes at Midnight*). When she leaves him, he sits up in bed and stares as if confused and then shouts out to no one: “God save thy grace, King Hal, my royal Hal.” Then, as his mind silently wanders, we hear but do not see Olivier in an echoey voiceover (itself an echo of Blimp’s Falstaffian “Forty years ago!”), delivering the speech with which Henry finally rejects Falstaff at the end of *2 Henry IV*:

> I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers.  
> How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!  
> I have long dreamed of such a kind of man,  
> So surfeit swelled, so old and so profane,  
> But being awaked I do despise my dream.  
> Reply not to me with a foolish jest,  
> Presume not that I am the thing I was;  
> For God doth know, so shall the world perceive  
> That I have turned away my former self  
> So shall I those that kept me company.  

During the recitation, the camera tracks in slowly toward a close-up of Falstaff’s face as he registers real hurt at the relived memory of Hal’s rejection. With this mix of close-up and voiceover, Olivier gives Falstaff the same cinematic interiority that we saw at work in Henry’s nighttime vigil. Just as the camera tracks in toward Olivier’s face as we listen to his rumination on the burdens of the great, so does it track in toward George Robey’s face as his Falstaff winces and finally crumbles at the remembered violence of Henry’s words. That Olivier films Falstaff in the same style as Henry lends the old, dying knight a representational dignity otherwise reserved for the
king; only Henry and Falstaff are filmed in this way. As the speech comes to an end, Falstaff lies down and dies; and because he had stood for the possibility of play and managed misrule within a world otherwise organized by the demands of domestic and foreign war, his death represents an especially poignant version of the passage away from the logic of the game that I described in the previous section. As opposed to some of the dismissive wartime readings that I’ve described, Olivier takes care to register Falstaff’s death as a real and significant loss, as something as fully momentous as the death of a king; and although the film seems almost to forget this moment in the rush of Henry’s war on France, the aesthetic and affective pressure it puts on the film’s whole style, on what other close-ups or tracking shots can mean, allows a melancholic, critical, and unexpectedly Falstaffian counter-melody to play out under Henry V’s otherwise martial tone: “What is honour? A word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? Air.”

In other words, whereas the wartime critics sought to denigrate the knight in order to celebrate the king, Olivier seems genuinely to mourn the loss of Falstaff and what he represents. The tone of Henry’s remembered or hallucinated rejection speech is anything but heroic; Olivier’s performance is, within the larger context of the film, uncharacteristically nasty. His voice is thin and hectoring, a marked contrast to the confident warmth and wry self-consciousness that informs the rest of his performance, and it is impossible to take the pain that passes across Falstaff’s face as anything but sincere. Compared with other iconic representations of a plump and smiling Jack (and, indeed, with George Robey’s own earlier portrayal in 1935), this Falstaff is hollowed out, his gaunt face proof that the king’s rejection had indeed left him, as Pistol says later in the scene, “fraced and corroborate.” This Falstaff, a wreck of a once-formidable man, demands at least our pity, maybe our respect, and almost certainly our love. The palpable melancholy of the scene makes his death, and thus Hal’s rejection, register not as an inevitability but rather as a real and regrettable loss. Olivier’s implicit account of the scene comes in some ways close to Bradley’s early and more openly generous account: Falstaff’s death proves “beyond doubt that his rejection was meant by Shakespeare to be taken as a catastrophe.” To lose Falstaff is, however necessary, to lose a whole way of life: “Banish Plump Jack and banish all the world.”

What Falstaff brought to the world of Henry IV and what must die with him is a sense of relief, freedom, and the possibility of even temporary release from the seriousness of life at court and on the battlefield. “The achievement was Falstaff himself, and the conception of that freedom of soul, a freedom illusory only in part, and attainable only by a mind which
had received from Shakespeare’s own the inexplicable touch of infinity which he bestowed on Hamlet and Macbeth and Cleopatra, but denied to Henry the Fifth. Bradley looks to that “touch of infinity” both to see something like an outside or an alternative to Henry’s fully managed world and to find a figure for a living irony that Schlegel associated with the related figure of the opera’s comic buffo (“the mood that surveys everything and rises infinitely above all limitations, even above its own art, virtue or genius”). For William Empson, writing between the wars, Falstaff embodied the tense, critical, political potential of pastoral itself: “But to stretch one’s mind round the whole character (as is generally admitted) one must take him, though as the supreme expression of the cult of mockery as strength and the comic idealization of freedom, yet as both villainous and tragically ill-used.”

In 1945, Orson Welles returned to Bradley’s romantic sense of the relation between the excessive and critical vitality of Hamlet and Falstaff in “Orson Welles’ Almanac,” his regular column in the New York Post: “Not long before he was killed, the Prince of Denmark visited England. Suppose he’d stayed there and avoided the ghosts and graveyards (he didn’t like them, anyway), and lived to be old and fat . . . Did he change his name? . . . I think Falstaff is Hamlet—an old and wicked Hamlet—having that drink.”

**Chimes at Midnight**

Welles’s extended reading of Falstaff in *Chimes at Midnight* (1965) is, I think, a late and useful thematic expansion of the character’s brief appearance in
Olivier’s film. For Welles, the rejection and death of Falstaff stood for a sense of cultural decline that was his main theme in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942): “You see, the basic intention was to portray a golden world—almost one of memory—and then show what it turns into.” Just as the invention of the automobile signaled the end of an older way of experiencing time, community, and thus storytelling, so does the story of Falstaff’s fall offer an account of disenchantment and decline. As Peter Bogdanovich points out, the style of the framing shot of Falstaff and Shallow in *Chimes*, their faces caught in the glow of a fire, recalls a similar close-up of the elderly Major Amberson in *The Magnificent Ambersons* as he reflects in the reflected light of a fire on his life’s imminent end: “he realized that everything which had worried him or delighted him during this lifetime, all his buying and building and trading and banking, that it was all trifling and waste beside what concerned him now.” In both cases, reflection in the present—a reflection compared implicitly both to the flickering lights of a fire and the similar flicker of the projected cinematic image—is an act that both recalls and re-makes the past. In Welles’s words: “Even if the good old days never existed, the fact that we can conceive of such a world is, in fact, an affirmation of the human spirit. That the imagination of man is capable of creating the myth of a more open, more generous time is not a sign of our folly. Every country has its ‘Merrie England,’ a season of innocence, a dew-bright morning of the world. Shakespeare sings of that lost time in many of his plays, and Falstaff—that pot-ridden old rogue—is its perfect embodiment.” Welles thus gets at a logic that runs throughout this book. The look back to an innocent past that I’ve been tracking through and around these films is not simply a misplaced nostalgia for what never really existed; rather what’s at stake is the very ability to imagine a position from which to see either past or future in the midst of an otherwise totalized present. What is under threat for Powell and Pressburger, Welles, and, as we will see, Olivier isn’t one or another past (although that’s part of it). It is “the imagination of man” as such that has been put at risk by the logic of total war.

The loss of this at once real and imagined “Merrie England” runs throughout *Chimes*, from a silhouetted opening shot of Falstaff and Shallow making their way across an evacuated and wintry landscape (a shot that recalls the end of Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*) to his enervated confrontation with physical limit and mortality in the arms of Doll Tearsheet: “I am old, I am old.” This anxiety about modernity’s onset is maybe most visible in Welles’s treatment of the battle of Shrewsbury, where he pushes the modern logic of guerrilla warfare already present in Olivier’s film toward a violent but logical extreme. Just as Welles collapses and rearranges
elements from across the Henriad, so does he seem to import details from Agincourt—particularly Henry’s reliance on quick, lightly armored commando fighters—into the earlier encounter with Hotspur on the fields of Shrewsbury. He approaches the battle with a mix of Brueghelian gusto and real horror that anticipates other stylized Vietnam-era representations of violence such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Soldiers kill each other with swords, arrows, and spiked clubs; bodies pile up in a muddy tangle of limbs; horses rear up wild-eyed with terror. In one brief and inexplicable shot, a man appears to sit, hacking away at a dead horse while battle rages all around. Almost as soon as the sequence begins, it becomes impossible to differentiate one army from the other, a fact underlined both by increasingly muddy conditions on the field and by shots that are largely unframed, asymmetrical, and thus resistant to a shot/reverse shot logic that organizes many conventional fight scenes. Welles uses handheld cameras and rapid cuts not only to capture the intensity of battle but also its essential confusion. As the fight proceeds, the musical soundtrack seems to recede further and further into the scene’s acoustic mix as diegetic shouts, groans, and the clang of metal against metal begins to overwhelm everything else. Welles cuts several times to individual, bloodied faces; in each case, the camera holds onto a face just long enough to register the bare fact that a face is individual before once again cutting away, a rhythm that just introduces the dimmest idea of a person before reducing that person to matter.

Welles punctuates the sequence with shots of a fully, ridiculously, and massively armored Falstaff running for cover from tree to tree. Like the shots that represent him, Falstaff is isolated and uncharacteristically mute during most of the battle of Shrewsbury. Welles sometimes seems to shoot him running around the battle’s outskirts at a higher speed, an effect that hearkens back to the harried, frenetic look of silent-age comedy. These shots, however, are not funny; they, along with similarly brief, terrified reaction shots from Bardolph and Pistol, seem rather to stand as a kind of structural witness to the battle as well as an essential failure of comedy in the face of violence. Like Henry’s effort to mock mockery itself, the battle seems to have revalued Falstaff’s otherwise splendid superfluity. While his eccentric excessiveness of person and personality once had been an opportunity for irony, play, and critique, he is suddenly reduced to something merely extraneous, something simply without a role to play; this dissolution of comic potential provides a point of structural commentary on the scene’s gratuitous loss of life. This bad superfluity—a comic excess that fails all at once to be funny—is also an aspect of the larger generic structure of Welles’s film.
and of Welles’s interpretation of the Henriad. Whereas another version of
the scene might have played Falstaff’s appearances for comic relief, Welles
takes pains to present Falstaff’s failure as the failure of comedy itself. In
other contexts, the tension between comedy and tragedy has been under-
stood as an essentially Shakespearean understanding of what’s meaningful
about both. For Coleridge, “Shakespeare’s comic are continually reacting
upon his tragic characters.” More recently and more pointedly, Lawrence
Danson writes: “[T]he Henry IV plays are a virtual dialogue between tragedy
and comedy. The biggest sign of this . . . is Falstaff.” Insofar as Chimes at
Midnight is an attempt to register the loss of Falstaff and his world, it is also
an analysis of genre’s dialectical failure, a failure that finds its way also, I
maintain, into Olivier’s Henry V.

A Little Song, a Little Dance
Of course, both Shakespeare and Olivier do end with a turn to comedy, the
play’s turn to canned marriage comedy at its end: “The generic slide from
history to comedy in act five of the play celebrates the procreative and
dynastic convergence that war has brought about in the course of events. It
also extends the happy ending from realms of politics and love to those aes-
thetics and epistemology.” This entirely instrumental comedy couldn’t be
further from the critical spirit of misrule that characterizes Falstaff’s humor.
Indeed, whereas the presence of Falstaff and the world of the Boar’s Head
seems to activate, clarify, and augment other plots, the turn to Henry and
Katherine’s frankly awkward love talk at the end of *Henry V* stands instead as the final rejection of Falstaff and the comic potential he represents. As opposed to Falstaff, who seemed often to open things up, Henry’s grossly sexual aggression (“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”) brings things to a depressing close. The ideologically leaden shift from history to comedy at the end of *Henry V* is thus different in kind from the complex comic dialectic explored in the earlier parts of the Henriad. Whereas *Henry V* ends with the promise of a wedding, *2 Henry IV* ends with a jig, which would have been danced by Will Kemp, the actor who had most likely played Falstaff: “As the fifth act comes to a close, Sir John Falstaff—played by Kemp—is hauled off to the Fleet prison, and it looks for once as if Falstaff, that great escape artist, will not be able to wriggle out of trouble. But Kemp suddenly dashes back onstage. A moment or two passes before playgoers realize that the play really is over and that Kemp is delivering an epilogue not as Falstaff but more or less as himself.” Kemp would then deliver the play’s epilogue, which announced both that Falstaff would return in *Henry V* and that a jig was immediately to follow: “My tongue is weary. When my legs are too, I will bid you good night.” Unlike other players, Kemp never let you forget he was Kemp, no matter what the role: “In the long-established manner of the Clown or Vice, Kemp/Falstaff repeatedly ruptured aesthetic codes which other players sustained.” Clowns like Kemp “weren’t intended to be believable characters, that is to say, like real people, not even when playing fully fleshed-out roles like Falstaff. This was because leading clowns were also always playing themselves, or rather, the stage identity they so carefully crafted.”

Both Welles and Olivier refer implicitly to the influence of Kemp with their casting decisions for Falstaff. As Welles understood, he wasn’t the sort of actor who could disappear into a role even if he wanted to: “There are personalities who seem to be overstatements in themselves. Unhappily, I’m one of those. The camera doesn’t just enlarge—it blows me up.” (One can see how fully Welles had internalized Falstaff: “A plague of sighing and grief! It blows a man up like a bladder.”) Joss Ackland, who played the role in 1982, claimed Welles as an influence on his own Falstaff; but rather than look to Welles’s portrayal of Falstaff, he looked instead to “the real Orson Welles”: “As a man Welles exploded brilliantly, and then didn’t know where to go. Like Falstaff, I believe he could have achieved so much, but it was frittered away. He gives everyone a lot to laugh about and can laugh at it too. But inside he is crying. He can see the waste, because he is not a stupid man.” Welles is in this way a perfect Falstaff. Not only does
he manage to capture the outsized vitality of Shakespeare’s character, but he also manages—by virtue of his very inability to disappear into the role—to capture an essential element of Shakespearean dramaturgy.

Olivier’s choice of George Robey for the role was similarly inspired. Like both Kemp and Welles, Robey was a famous song-and-dance man whose style of music hall comedy had more or less disappeared by the middle of the 1940s. Robey’s presence in Henry V reveals a complex and highly impacted set of allusive layers: Robey had played Falstaff before and so brought—like Olivier—some trace of the stage into the cinematic world of Henry V, a fact that adds to Olivier’s effort to create a productive hybrid of film and theater. Robey’s immense success as a stage clown (he called himself the prime minister of Mirth) reminds us of Kemp in relation both to his humor and to the fact that Kemp had left the Lord Chamberlain’s Men prior to the composition of Henry V; like Kemp and Falstaff, events had rendered Robey and his particular set of skills more or less obsolete. Robey thus reminds us of a certain type of historically specific comedy as well as of the occasion for that comedy’s disappearance. The waning of Robey’s particular brand of music hall comedy had been widely registered as a significant cultural loss; in a 1922 “London Letter,” T. S. Eliot wrote, “I thought of Marie Lloyd again; and wondered again why that directness, frankness, and ferocious humor which survive in her, and in Nellie Wallace and George Robey and a few others, should be extinct, should be odious to the British public, in precisely those forms of art in which they are most needed, and in which, in fact, they used to flourish.” For Eliot, the waning of the music hall signaled the end of a larger cultural project that had all but disappeared: “The poet’s dark apprehension [about the death of the music hall] stems from the deeper realization that a certain kind of critical project has passed.”

Aligning Kemp, Robey, and the fate of the music hall with the figure of his dying Falstaff, Olivier raises the idea of a loss that transcends the terms of one old man’s love for a young prince. The casting of Robey allows us to see in Falstaff a loss specific to the period of modern warfare that Olivier is working to manage. Left there, we could say that Olivier’s bracketed introduction of Falstaff into his film registers a loss that was necessary to the wars that Henry and Churchill needed respectively to fight. Writing about the progressive and eccentric tenor of J. B. Priestley’s BBC “Postscripts,” Angus Calder writes: “If Churchill evoked Henry V and Thomas Babbington Macaulay, Priestly’s heroes were Falstaff and Sam Weller. He depicted the ‘little man,’ who preserved the spirit of English comedy within himself, embattled against Nazis whom he variously described as ‘robot men,’ ‘warrior
Henry V

This is, in other words, another expression of the paradox of total war that I’ve been tracking: that we need to suspend the values—of play, irony, eccentricity, and good cheer—that Falstaff represents in order to save those values. Falstaff was sacrificed to save Falstaff.

Lambkins, We Will Live!

This, though, would be to miss the more central and more unruly way in which the spirit of Falstaff lingers on in Henry V. Although he doesn’t appear in Shakespeare’s play and appears only briefly (although, as we have seen, suggestively) in Olivier’s film, Falstaff is remembered in both by his more resilient if less lovable followers from the Boar’s Head. Immediately after Falstaff’s death, Pistol, Bardolf, and Nym pack up and follow Henry to war. Upon hearing of Falstaff’s imminent demise, Pistol shouts out, “Let us condole the knight. For, lambkins, we will live!” And live Pistol does: although he plays only a small role in 2 Henry IV and does not appear at all in 1 Henry IV, Pistol is certainly the most important of Falstaff’s survivors in Henry V. He appears more often than either Bardolph or Nym and is in fact the only character from Falstaff’s world allowed to outlive the events of the second teratology; he is thus “a constant reminder that the price of Harry’s greatness is the rejection of Falstaff.”

Although he is, as Samuel Johnson puts it, at least “beaten into obscurity,” Pistol is not dead at the play’s end and promises in a late soliloquy to return home: “To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal.”

It makes a kind of sense that Shakespeare would promote the perfectly minor Pistol to a major role in Henry V. For one, he provides an important foil for the young king, offering, with his mix of ersatz military aggression, impotent bluster (“Pish for thee, Iceland dog, thou prick-eared cur of Iceland!”), and essential cowardice, a neat figure against which the king can shine; he thus offers another “contagious cloud” for the king to blow away in order performatively to secure his greatness. Pistol’s presence thus weakly doubles the king and is thus a knowingly compromised gesture back to the more robustly dialectal structure of both parts of Henry IV, where the oppositions between Hal and Hotspur, Henry IV and Falstaff, the court and the Boar’s Head, comedy and tragedy provided a ready set of semiotic squares out of which Henry V’s sovereign values could eventually emerge. Pistol, more shadow than double, both connects and distances the conceptual structure of Henry V from the rigorous conceptual design of the earlier plays, offering a last hint of a historical logic that comes to a close with the end of the Henriad. Pistol’s dim and sardonic reflection of Henry’s
military bearing thus functions both as an appropriate reminder of the history that brought Henry to Agincourt and as final proof that the problems that motivated that history have all but come to an end.

Pistol, however, is not simply minor; he is aggressively minor. According to Coleridge, “Pistol, Nym and id genus omne, do not please us as characters but are endured as fantastic creations, foils to the native wit of Falstaff.” Hazlitt, referring to the overall weakness of the comedy in *Henry V*, writes, “Falstaff is dead, and without him, Pistol, Nym, and Bardolph are satellites without a sun.” Pistol’s special minorness is in part an effect of a style that seems out of sync with his context. He is a walking anachronism. Whereas Falstaff and Henry are both characterized by their differently but resolutely modern speech, Pistol talks as if he has wandered in from another play, namely from Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*; his bluster and ornate verse diction are self-conscious parodies of Marlowe’s style, a fact underlined by Pistol’s habit of incoherently misquoting his model: “Shall pack-horses/And hollow pampered jades of Asia,/Which cannot go but thirty mile a day,/Compare with Caesars, and with Cannibals,/And Trojan Greeks!” The implicit comparison between Shakespeare’s ideal king and Marlowe’s earlier hero is meant to assert the measure and prosy modernity of Henry’s style. And, if Marlowe is meant to be read as old-fashioned within the context of *Henry V*, Pistol’s proximity to Marlowe marks him as simply out of touch: “if Pistol is a Tamburlaine-figure, he is a Tamburlaine who is frozen in time, who cannot escape the cadences, affect, and consciousness of 1588.” Pistol thus represents both the incomplete incorporation of another style within the otherwise homogenous context of *Henry V* (especially homogenous when compared with the dialectical work of both parts of *Henry IV*) and the parodic presence of another, older kind of violence working alongside the modern military and political tactics that Henry embraces and represents.

There is another, more formal aspect to Pistol’s minorness. Whereas Falstaff relies on a delicate compromise between cerebral self-possession and bodily absurdity for his comic effect, Pistol seems almost entirely to lack self-consciousness. Whereas Bradley could imagine Falstaff as possessing a “touch of infinity” because he is a character in a play who seems to know that he is a character in a play, Pistol represents a raw and unknowing excess of energy that falls specifically short of Falstaff’s critical irony. His anachronism, his excessive style, his tendency to fly off the handle and to take up too much space all suggest that, instead of somehow rising above the limits of his form, he embodies something like that form’s failure. Pistol thus offers a good example of what in another context Alex Woloch refers
to as the more exaggerated of the “two pervasive extremes of minorness.”

As opposed to the worker, Pistol is the eccentric, “the minor character [who] grates against his or her position and is usually, as a consequence, wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed.” When Pistol first appears in the Henriad, he appears mostly as an opportunity for Falstaff to chase him out, a scene that anticipates his final disgrace and exile: “No more, Pistol; I would not have you go off here. Discharge yourself of our company, Pistol.” Like the men Falstaff drafts as “food for powder”—Mouldy, Feeble, Wart, and others—Pistol’s very name seems to mark (or, in the language of the Elizabethan draft, to “prick”) him as a necessary and inevitable sacrifice to his own excessively particular literary function.

Put in related terms, Pistol is a bearer of what Scott Bukatman, following Sianne Ngai and using Daffy Duck as an example, calls “animatedness”: like Daffy, Pistol “is animated: as in, mobile and kinetic. He is animated: as in, energetic and vital. He is animated: as in, ‘exaggeratedly emotional.’ He is animated: as in, overanimated, annoying, irritating (other ugly feelings).” This might be one reason that the part of Pistol has the reputation of being nearly impossible to carry off: “Pistol’s marvelous tight-rope balancing of grandeur and incongruity too easily degenerates into unfunny and unbelievable shouting and posturing.” Pistol is thus what Falstaff and Henry are not; he has neither Falstaff’s self-conscious and ironic “touch of infinity” nor Henry’s ability to force together oppositions—man and king, court and tavern, body and mind—in the service of the state. As opposed to the specific and critical force that Falstaff activated within the two previous plays, Pistol’s minorness exists boldly and badly in opposition to just about everything, which is to say he exists in opposition to nothing at all.

**Exit Stage Right**

Soon after Henry’s first appearance onstage, Olivier reveals Robert Newton’s Pistol in a strikingly similar manner. I’ve already described Henry’s entrance: Olivier, playing an actor preparing to play Henry, waits backstage for his cue. After a slight cough, he crosses the threshold and seems transformed from an actor into a king; or, rather, the body of the actor seems to have been absorbed into the represented person of the king. As I’ve suggested, Olivier manages this entrance to make another kind of argument about the authority that the king represents. He not only gestures toward the political theology of the king’s two bodies but also embodies the promise of wartime and postwar consensus. Because World War II was a total war and depended on broad commitment to total mobilization, it became necessary to overcome old differences (socioeconomic, sexual, ethnic) that
might prevent society from working efficiently toward its shared goal. As the war drew to its conclusion, it became increasingly important to imagine what society would look like after years of social, cultural, and economic disruption. Part of what makes *Henry V* “splendid propaganda” is, as I’ve mentioned, that its implied synthesis of actor and character, man and king, king and state could model that necessary unity.

It is striking that Henry and Pistol’s first appearances are treated in so similar a manner. The actor playing Pistol (who is in turn played by Robert Newton) enters via the same door that Henry passed through a few scenes earlier. He is also met with a vigorous burst of applause. Once again, a modern actor playing an early modern actor playing an earlier modern character enters stage right to enthusiastic applause; both acknowledge the crowd’s reaction and begin to play their respective parts; then, when their scenes are done, they exit the stage, bowing appreciatively to an appreciative audience. That, though, is where the similarities end. Whereas Olivier’s performance collapsed actor and character, Newton’s actor instead exaggerates the space between the two, playing the role more like a celebrity playing himself than an Elizabethan actor playing a Shakespearean character. Where we had watched Henry from across a threshold between backstage and stage, we see Pistol enter from an audience member’s point of view. The audience is indeed more fully realized here; we get a reaction shot of delighted groundlings, giving us the sense that the performance is a sort of shot/reverse shot dialogue between performer and viewer. Pistol (or rather the actor playing Pistol who is in turn played by Newton) hams it up. “Pistol appears to elicit a show of accustomed pleasure from the groundlings who ‘seem to be responding to a star comedian rather than to the role he is playing.’”

He moves to the front of the stage and plays to the crowd, doffing his cap, sticking out his tongue, and rolling his eyes. The actor playing Pistol appears to use his other actors more or less as an opportunity to address the audience directly. At the end of his scene, he lingers on stage, soaking up the crowd’s applause for a few extra beats, and needs the Chorus to usher him off with a grateful but slightly exasperated wave before the play can continue.

**Mr. Newton Tears His Cat**

Newton’s performance thus adds to the argument Olivier made when he cast George Robey as his dying Falstaff. Just as that decision forces us into a position of double exposure where we see both Robey and Falstaff, which is itself an echo of Kemp and Falstaff, so does the self-conscious staginess of Pistol’s first entrance alert us to the doubled or rather trebled presence of an actor playing an actor playing a character. As I’ve already suggested, the
Enter ancient Pistol.
Elizabethan clown or Vice worked at an angle oblique to the rest of a play’s cast. Whereas other actors would be expected to stick to their lines and subordinate their performances to the larger structure and intent of a play, part of a good clown’s appeal came from his tendency to go off script, to improvise, to take up space. Olivier thus illustrates an older relation between the hero and the clown with the cinematic difference between the leading man and the character actor: “The character actors’ acting surrounds that of the heroes like a baroque frame surrounds a renaissance painting. The fat uncle with a monkey and a traveling blanket, the skinny piano teacher with a bun and a pince-nez, the decrepit mayor, the hunchback inventor, the Galician profiteer, the bloated ship’s cook—these are the character actors.”

Pistol—with his leering eye, feathered cap, and broken sword—would fit nicely into Arnheim’s list; he both stands as a sort of comic grotesque and, as we have seen, offers an indigestibly specific point against which the sovereign generality of the king might become visible. We might leave things there and say simply that Olivier and Newton work together in *Henry V* both to offer and interpretation of Shakespeare’s play and to reveal historical aspects of the Elizabethan theater in terms that a modern audience would immediately understand; as with the rejection and death of Falstaff, the grotesque particularity of Pistol stands as a conceptual precondition for the king’s less distinct but no less important generality.

However, leaving things there, we would miss a fundamental aspect of Newton’s performance. Just as Welles, Robey, and Kemp seemed born to play Falstaff, Newton seems to have been born to play Pistol. If to play Pistol is almost necessarily to overplay him, this was a risk with which Newton would have been all too familiar. Simply put, Newton was a ham. “Newton not only chewed the scenery, but spat it out as well”; he was “a star character actor with a rolling eye and a voice to match; a ham, but a succulent one”; his were “rip-roaring characterizations”; in one part, he “rolled his eyes and leered and mouthed”; and his portrayals in general were “eye-popping, vein-bulging.” Although these aspects of Newton’s acting style became exaggerated over time and reached a kind of culmination with his iconic take on Long John Silver, they were already aspects of his reputation when Olivier cast him in *Henry V*. Newton’s considerable appeal as an actor thus stems precisely from his ability to push performances toward and sometimes past expressive limits without losing the thread of a performance or his considerable charisma. One critic writes of his Ferrovius in *Androcles and the Lion* (1952) that his performance “has a bizarre quality which—partly, one feels, by natural accident—is effective.” The question in that case is, what are we to make not only of the innate energy of Shakespeare’s Pistol but
also of how Olivier understood that energy when he cast Robert Newton? If Robey’s gently autumnal Falstaff worked to signal the film’s sense of a cultural loss that connected the waning of music hall with the experience of modern warfare, what is the doubly animated Pistol doing within the context of Olivier’s otherwise “splendid” propaganda? Put differently, if much of Olivier’s film seeks to marry the externalized artificiality of the stage with a more internal, naturalistic, and tasteful film style, what are we to do with the exaggerated and, perhaps, unexpected centrality of Newton’s absurd and “eye-popping” Pistol?

With few exceptions, Newton’s roles from the period follow a pattern: the characters he plays are outsized, violent, charismatic, and often drunk. In Lance Comfort’s frankly florid *Hatter’s Castle* (1942), he plays James Brodie, the cruel and increasingly unhinged hatter of the film’s title; a creature of intense pride, Brodie builds a mansion he cannot afford in an effort to assert his importance. Brodie bullies everyone: he is monstrous to his terminally ill wife; he sends his pregnant daughter out of his home and into a rainstorm; he drives his young son to suicide. In the meantime, increasingly humbled by events, he becomes more and more unstable and rarely appears without a glass of whiskey in hand. The film ends with Brodie burning his castle down and dying with much bathetic sound and fury. Newton plays the role with a low Scottish burr and a feeling of barely restrained and enormous rage; one reviewer wrote that the film “provides a part to tear a cat in, and Mr. Newton tears his cat magnificently.”

In 1947 he appeared in Carol Reed’s *Odd Man Out*. The film follows Johnny, an Irish revolutionary wounded in a botched bank robbery, as he makes his weary way around a nightmare Belfast seeking and failing to find sanctuary. The film is striking for a number of reasons: filmed by Robert Krasker, the film anticipates the noir look of *The Third Man*, another of his collaborations with Reed. Krasker’s Belfast is full of long shadows, streets luminously slick with rain, and rubble left behind from the Belfast Blitz. The film also anticipates *The Third Man* in its bleak postwar view of humanity; with each new meeting, Johnny learns that average people either want only to protect themselves or to exploit him to gain power, influence, and money. Like *The Third Man, Odd Man Out* offers a dark and barely displaced comment on both the aftereffects of war and of the experience of ethical compromise under occupation. Within this dismal context, Newton plays Lukey, a “wild-eyed and drunken painter,” living in an abandoned house with a small-time grifter and a washed-up, alcoholic doctor. Once the wounded Johnny ends up in their house, Lukey decides to paint his portrait, hoping to capture some ecstatic essence of the dying man as he passes from one world to the next. Once
again, Newton’s performance is broad, overstated, and utterly compelling, particularly when held against James Mason’s portrayal of Johnny, the film’s elegant martyr. Newton would go on to play a number of similarly broad and driven roles: the enormously violent Bill Sykes in Oliver Twist (1948), Long John Silver in Treasure Island (1950), and the monomaniacal Etienne Javert in Les Miserables (1952). His turn as solid middle-class paterfamilias, Frank Gibbons, in This Happy Breed (1944) is something of an exception; that said, Lean and Coward manage nonetheless to give him one scene in which to get rip-roaring drunk.

Like Kemp, Robey, or Welles, Newton often seems to run against the grain of the worlds in which he appears. In these terms, Newton’s performances can recall Alexander Nemerov’s account of Skelton Knaggs’s brief and bizarre appearance as “the Finn” in Val Lewton’s The Ghost Ship: “There the sense of being constrained, of being unimportant—of having to strum up a hyperbole of gargoyleish effects all in an instant that somehow still comport with the idea of ‘soul,’ of having to lay down intimations of depth across the flat signatures of sudden triviality—makes it Knagg’s most poignant and socially meaningful moment as a screen actor.”¹²⁰ In Newton’s case, the irrepressible eccentricity of the character actor stands as a similarly enigmatic answer to the film seen as an aesthetic whole; like Knaggs, Newton “stands out, obdurate and strange, instead of retiring into the background.”¹²¹ To cast the aggressively, irrepressibly minor Newton in a film was, as Olivier must have seen, to make argument in and of itself. Given this larger context, we should understand that when Olivier cast Newton as Pistol, he was both responding to and helping to solidify the actor’s relationship to a particular type of character, a type that carried with it a set of significances that work not only to support ideas in and about Henry V but also to make the character and the film legible in relation to the film’s status as propaganda. There are, in that case, a few questions. What did Olivier and his audience see when they saw Robert Newton? What does Newton’s particular position as a recognizable type add to Henry V? And what did the presence of Robert Newton have to say about the war?

**Pistol’s Cock Is Up!**

As mentioned previously, Olivier puts Pistol and Henry into a sort of competition via their similar but different entrances. Whereas Olivier’s performance allows us to imagine a successful fusion of actors and characters, men and kings, individuals and states, Newton’s performance accentuates the space between the character and the actor. Although Newton, the actor he plays, and the character that that actor plays are all animated by a sim-
ilarly manic energy, that energy sets them all at odds with each other and with the scenes that would otherwise contain them. Newton thus evokes a counterfactual desire that, as David Thomson suggests, follows from other great and minor film performances: “Just by virtue of their color, eccentricity, vivacity, and fidelity, don’t our most beloved character actors suggest a logic, or a passion, in which their characters are at least as important as any others on view?” In this sense, Newton participates in a struggle that Nemerov, drawing on Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many*, takes as central to Lewton’s wartime films: “The subversive potential of the bit player most often took the form of a contest between minor and major actors in the same scene, a competition visible now thanks to . . . Woloch’s theory of the jostling between minor characters and protagonist in the space of the novel.” The eccentricity, the particularity, the vivacity, and the anarchic charm of the bit player can thus exceed his or her structural function and to stand as an implicit or explicit criticism of norms that a film might otherwise seem to support; Nemerov quotes the great Manny Farber: “The era’s movies were ‘never more savage and uninhibited than in those moments when a whirring energy is created in back of the static mannered acting of some Great Star.’” This potential for structural violence in the encounter between major and minor is something that both Woloch and Nemerov illustrate with an example from *The Iliad*; and, if Pistol has an equivalent in Homer’s epic, it is certainly Thersites, a figure whom Woloch calls “the first truly minor character in Western literature.” What set Thersites apart from his fellow Greeks was both his particularity (he is not just ugly but the ugliest man around) and his satiric aggression: “Thersites exceeds, and threatens, the hierarchical framework of the Greek army camp.” Nemerov adds that Thersites’s “physical and verbal domination signals a disruption of established order, an absence of authority in which he attains a powerful realization.”

This description could just as easily apply to Pistol, who in the absence of Falstaff emerges as the Boar’s Head’s leading light. He has married Mistress Quickly and become the de facto leader of Falstaff’s band of misfits and drunks, whom he in turn leads as camp followers to France. However, where Falstaff had real force and stood, at least for a time, as a potent ethical threat to Henry’s authority, Pistol has, as played by Newton, only his exaggerated and weird vitality to carry him through. In addition to his convoluted, pseudoliterary jibes and insults, he is marked in Olivier’s film by his sharply drawn physical characteristics: an unruly mop of hair, an often protruding tongue, rolling eyes, a feathered cap, and suggestively broken sword. Taken together, his verbal performance—crazy, profane, oddly
and his physical appearance allow him to take up space that might seem otherwise to belong to the protagonist. And while Pistol is at last dispatched, he nonetheless seems, at least for a moment or two, to command as much attention and admiration as a king; this is the Pistol’s threat, just as it was Thersites’s threat. (Indeed, Shakespeare’s own Thersites has more than a little Pistol in him: “The plague of Greece upon thee, thou mongrel beef-witted lord!”)

That said, neither Woloch nor Nemerov go on to say what happens next to Thersites. As part of his effort to rally the Greeks for war, Odysseus makes a spectacular example of Theristes, calling him a “cur” before striking him with Agamemnon’s scepter:

And he cracked the scepter across his back and shoulders.
The rascal doubled over, tears streaking his face
and a bloody welt bulged up between his blades,
under a stroke of the golden scepter’s studs.
He squatted low, cringing, stunned with pain,
blinking like some idiot rubbing his tears off dumbly with a fist.
Their morale was low but the men laughed now,
good hearty laughter breaking over Thersites’ head.

At one stroke, Thersites is wounded, humiliated, and silenced; and this is the last we hear of a character who seemed for a moment capable of bringing down a whole army. Pistol meets a similar fate at the end of Henry V. After the battle has been won, Captains Gower and Fluellen discuss Pistol’s probable behavior upon his return to London; Gower says, “Why, ’tis a gull, a fool, a rogue, that now and then goes to the wars, to grace himself at his return to London, under the form of soldier, and what such of the camp can do among foaming bottles, and ale-washed wits, is wonderful to be thought on.” When Pistol inevitably appears, Fluellen accosts him and demands that he eat his leek, a token of Welsh identity that Pistol had mocked the day before: “I préech you heartily, scurvy lousy knave, to eat, look you, this leek.” Pistol draws his sword with a “Base Trojan, thou shalt die.” Fluellen then takes the sword away, bangs him on the head, at which point Pistol falls to his knees, just as Thersites had before him. Fluellen then forces him to eat the leek: “If you can mock a leek, you can eat a leek. Bite, I pray you.” Like his king, Fluellen mocks the mock, removing the leek from its position as a metaphor and asserting its dumb and aggressive identity with itself: a leek is a leek is a leek—so eat it. Although Olivier tempers the violence of the scene (in Shakespeare Fluellen strikes Pistol several times, drawing
blood), it is nonetheless disturbing. Pistol has been a fool, of course, but does he deserve this?

Why does Pistol receive Thersites’s treatment in Shakespeare and then later in Olivier? Why must he be punished? In part, this is a simple and diminished repetition of the earlier and more definitive rejection of Falstaff. As I have suggested, in order to secure his authority as a king and soldier, Hal had to reject Falstaff, to reduce the complexity both of his own personality and his world. This need to reject or disavow freedom in the name of security is, as we have seen, an element of the second teratology that wartime critics returned to again and again in order to find justifications for the culture of total mobilization. It is also an expression of the paradox at the heart of total war: in order to save culture, we must sacrifice culture; in order to save Falstaff, we must kill Falstaff. Beating, humiliating, and finally chasing Pistol away might, in that case, be taken as a late reminder of what has been lost (liberty, humor, play) and gained (military and political victory) with the banishment of Falstaff at the end of 2 Henry IV.

We might also see the humiliation of Pistol as part of a larger argument about Henry and Olivier’s respective hopes for a postwar Britain. This late scene brings the Welsh Fluellen and the English Gower together and sets them genially plotting about how to teach Pistol a lesson. And, while Pistol speaks in as distinctive a manner as Fluellen, the latter’s speech is marked by regional particularity whereas Pistol’s is marked by its archaic literariness and its almost pure eccentricity. In other words, the conflict between
Fluellen and Pistol should, in some sense, be understood as the conflict between an ethically capacious, postethnic future and an archaic and atavistic literary past or, alternatively, between the official and unofficial modes of eccentricity that I laid out in the introduction. Fluellen’s attack on Pistol can be seen as part of a larger argument about postwar compromise that Olivier develops in terms of World War II as much as in the context of early modern conflict. Or we might say, again following Woloch, that Pistol’s humiliation is something like a formal allegory for a political idea that the play and the film represent. Insofar as the second tetralogy is about how a young man emerges from a mix of companions and competitors to become a nation, a play, and history’s protagonist, then Pistol’s banishment—which would amount to something like the banishment of minorness itself—would stand as a neat emblem or memorial for a process that has stretched across four plays, years of writing and performance, and, indeed, the whole of British history.

**King Lush**

There is, though, another aspect to the humiliation of Pistol, one that Olivier brings quietly to the surface of the film through his decision to cast Robert Newton in the role. In addition to his reputation as a hammy if brilliant character actor, Newton was also infamous for his own bad behavior and, in particular, his binge drinking. Like his father Algernon before him, Newton had been invalided out of military service and was a committed and public drinker; in 1941 he had been rejected by a naval officer selection board “for a commission on the grounds of [his] general lack of sobriety.”

His drinking was also often a threat to the films he acted in. Ronald Neame recalls bailing “him out of Bow Street police station” in the midst of one production. “The only remembrance Bob had was waking up in jail with a monumental hangover.” David Lean worried that he would fall off a roof during the filming of *Oliver Twist*: “we attached a rope to his belt and fed it through the tiles of the roof as a safety wire in case he stumbled.”

The actor Kenneth Griffith remembers:

> He lived in a sort of fantasy world, which was very alarming; but when he had to do his acting, he was very remarkable. I remember him meeting me one morning at the studio and saying, “I’m having an affair with a lady wrestler!” I used to sit with him at lunchtime in the grand baronial hall at Pinewood, along with all the important producers and accountants with all that essential shit going on. One day they were all being very respectable and you could see Robert moving. He suddenly said, “I’ve got the twinges! I’ve
got the twinges!!" and everyone got deeper into their soup. Then he took up a
great bread basket and swished it around, and people were trying to pretend
it wasn’t happening.\textsuperscript{135}

During the war, Newton used air raids as an opportunity to sneak a few
drinks while others sought safety underground: “When the alarm went and
everyone raced to the shelters . . . Newton . . . would stay behind, retrieve
[his] bottles and settle down on the property furniture for a solid period of
self-indulgence until the company reemerged.”\textsuperscript{136} Richard Burton, a boozing
protégé who referred to Newton as “King Lush,” recalled his giving him a
ride to the set of \textit{Waterfront Women} (1950) in his battered, old Bentley: “It
was winter and the car had a thin covering of frost and refused to start.
Newton handed Burton his flask, went back into the house and returned
with a horsewhip and began laying into the bonnet. When they tried the
ignition again the Bentley revved up.”\textsuperscript{137} David Niven remembers Newton
during the filming of \textit{Around the World in 80 Days}: “Bobbie confessed to
me that . . . his doctor had warned him that one more session with the
bottle would almost certainly be fatal.” One day “when he arrived for work,
a roaring delivery of ‘Once more unto the breach . . .’ announced alarming
news. ‘Oh, Bobbie,’ I said, ‘what have you done to yourself?’” Newton’s reply
is heartbreaking. With tears in his eyes, he implored Niven, “Don’t chide me,
dear fellow, please don’t chide me.”\textsuperscript{138}

Although Newton might seem like just another “hell-raiser” of the British
cinema—like Burton, Peter O’Toole, Richard Harris, and Oliver Reed—his
case is different because of when and how he drank. As opposed to those
more glamorous if ultimately no less tragic cases, Newton didn’t drink af-
after the war—he drank and drank to dangerous excess during it. In other
words, whereas the bad behavior of younger actors could be understood
as a reaction to and expression of emerging postwar prosperity after years
of war and economic austerity, the same prosperity that forms the loosely
permissive backdrop for films such as \textit{The Knack . . . and How to Get It}
(1965), \textit{Darling} (1965), and \textit{Alfie} (1966), Newton’s drinking during a time of
total mobilization—a time when eating, sleeping, talking, and not talking
were seen as part of the war effort—could be understood both as a failure
of will or “lack of moral fibre,” and as a performed and costly Falstaffian
resistance to the social logic of total war. That is not to say that his drinking
problem was different from what came before or after war; rather it could
have \textit{looked} like something different during wartime. We saw this anxiety in
the work of wartime Shakespeareans who felt it necessary to reject Falstaff
and his sack-drinking lack of restraint all over again. We can see it also in
Cyril Connolly’s 1938 identification of drink as one of the artist’s “enemies of promise”: “Drink is available and there are still artists who drink to excess out of the consciousness of wasted ability, for drunkenness is a substitute for art; it is in itself a low form of creation.”

Although one does not want to exaggerate the wartime stigma against heavy drinking, it was in fact the case that between World Wars I and II, the consumption of both beer and spirits in Britain had decreased drastically: “Between 1919 and 1939 consumption remained at historically low levels, though with variations reflecting the state of the economy and employment.” In a 1943 review of Mass Observation’s *The Pub and the People*, George Orwell writes, “The Mass Observers . . . have no difficulty in showing that there was extraordinarily little drunkenness in the period they were studying: for every five thousand hours that the average pub stays open, only one of its clients is drunk and disorderly.” As a result and as opposed to the previous war, there was no real outcry against drinking during World War II because, as John Burnett remarks, “National efficiency was not now threatened by drunkenness and industrial unrest, and in these circumstances government could regard reasonable supplies of beer (as of tea) to civilians and the forces as an aid to national morale at a time when many foods were rationed.” In a way that recalls my larger argument about official as opposed to unofficial eccentricity: “The conviviality of beer drinking,” writes James Nicholls, “had considerable purchase at a time when notions of traditional sociability were being harnessed as a defense against the cultural and military threat of the German war machine.” Seen in light of this relatively moderate and prosocial attitude toward drinking, Newton’s aggressive, antisocial, and atavistic drunkenness could have read as something very different from ordinary, culturally sanctioned drinking. In other words, by the time of *Henry V*, Newton had begun as an actor and a man to bear an excessive significance that must have contributed to his vexed appeal to directors as a character actor, particularly in films—such as *Henry V* and *Odd Man Out*—that reflected more or less explicitly on the experience and the costs of life during and after wartime.

There is another, related significance to Olivier’s decision to cast Newton as Pistol, one that becomes clear at the film’s end. After Agincourt, after the deaths of Falstaff, Nym, Bardolph, and, it is at last revealed, Mistress Quickly, and after Pistol’s final humiliation at the hands of Fluellen, Newton turns to face the camera to deliver Pistol’s parting speech.

*Doth Fortune play the strumpet with me now?*

*News have I that my Nell lies dead*
Henry V

I’ th’ hospital of a malady of France.
And there my rendezvous is quite cut off.
Old do I wax, and from my weary limbs
Honour is cudgelled. Well, bawd I’ll turn,
And something lean to cutpurse of quick hand.
To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal:
And patches will I get unto these scars,
And swear I got them in these present wars.  

The scene is notable for a few reasons. First, this is the only moment in the film’s naturalistic third act when an actor turns to the camera in order to address to the audience directly. As already described, Olivier represents both Henry’s soliloquy on the eve of Agincourt and Falstaff’s dying memory of Hal’s rejection as voiceovers spoken while the camera lingers closely on their pensive faces. His handling of those moments would seem to suggest the film’s adherence to naturalistic rules governing the impermeability of the fourth wall. It is for that reason all the more striking that, between his beating and his departure, Pistol turns to the camera in order to engage the audience directly. This helps in part to solidify Newton’s late place in the tradition of the clown or the Vice; as I said before, what differentiated the clown from other types of performances was exactly his tendency to break the performance’s frame to improvise and to stake a claim as an actor or celebrity as much as a character. And, while Pistol’s brief speech is not

“To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal.”
especially marked as a clown’s moment in Shakespeare (unlike, for instance, Kemp’s epilogue at the end of 2 Henry IV), Olivier treats it as if it were one; he strengthens and updates the connection by bringing a cartoonish, Looney Tunes quality to Pistol’s speech and, even more, to his scampering exit offstage and out of the film. The script directs: “The music starts as Pistol scurries off and disappears in a barn. . . . Pistol emerges from the other side of the barn with a pig under his arm and cockerel in his hand. He runs up the hill away from us and disappears.”

Newton’s late turn toward the audience represents the culmination of an exaggerated theatrical logic that has run like a countermelody throughout Henry V. For, while Olivier’s three stylistically distinct acts work like a tacitly progressive aesthetic history that takes us from the unapologetic and open theatricality of 1600, through the framed totalities of the Limboug brothers, to the antitheatrical cinematic naturalism of 1944, Newton’s Pistol remains resolutely the same—the clown, the fool, the parasite—despite the demands of political and aesthetic history. We could see this resistance as another aspect of Olivier’s scholarly project in Henry V. Trying to come to grips with an apparent shift in Shakespeare’s dramaturgy that coincides with the departure of Kemp and the death of Falstaff, Olivier maintains the exquisitely theatrical Pistol as a homeopathic excess that might both embody the older style of theater and, with its disappearance, fully usher in a new style. That said, Olivier also seems to see that the very logic of the scapegoat or parasite that would allow for that rejection also makes that rejection necessarily incomplete and encourages us to understand what remains and why. In other words, at the same time that Olivier’s film makes a difficult argument about what needs to be sacrificed in the service of this total war, it also acknowledges the real costs of that sacrifice. Like other wartime works discussed here, the film seeks via the figure of Pistol to make two apparently distinct arguments: one makes a case for the undeniable necessity of this war and the other a case against war as such. Pistol thus emerges as an anamorphic hinge that connects and separates the rabbit and the duck of total war. The film attempts to manage at the level of style a position that many were trying to manage during World War II: how to be really and honestly both for and against war.

When the fourth wall falls at this late moment, Pistol isn’t addressing just any audience; he is addressing a war-weary audience in 1944. What could Pistol have to say to 1944? What’s most important about this moment is that Pistol’s final message, delivered at once at the end of the battle of Agincourt and near the end of the war, is reflection on what happens when men come home from war. And it is, indeed, a message different in
kind from Henry’s exhortation that his men imagine themselves a “band of brothers,” trading war stories as veterans, grizzled and beloved at home. As opposed to the image of the scarred and noble old soldier, Pistol invites us to imagine the soldier returned home as a problem, as—in the spirit of Newton’s whole performance—someone or something excessive and troubling that cannot be readily reabsorbed into everyday life. Something like this, of course, has always been true of war. As Homer and then Tennyson imagined, an experience as violent, as absolute, as epic as war must have unsuited many men for a life at home, a life “centered in the sphere/Of common duties.” This is perhaps why it takes Odysseus so long to come home and why Achilles never comes home at all. Shakespeare seems to have had something similar, if decidedly and pointedly less epic, in mind when he imagined Pistol’s degraded homecoming. Joel Altman points to a contemporary 1598 Parliamentary “proclamation authorizing summary execution of incorrigible [beggars and vagabonds]. . . . Specifically mentioned were those ‘coloring their wandering by the name of soldiers lately come from the wars.’”146 James Shapiro writes: “Overlooked in the spectacle of Henry’s (and Essex’s) imagined homecoming is the largely suppressed and unhappy story of the return of war veterans like Pistol. . . . Through bitter war veterans like Pistol, Shakespeare also hints at the corrosive and unavoidable national cost of the Irish war.”147 And Rabkin adds: “[O]ur regret is for more than the end of some high comedy: it is for the reality of the postwar world the play so powerfully conjures up—soldiers returned home to find their jobs gone, falling to a life of crime in a seamy and impoverished underworld that scarcely remembers the hopes that accompanied the beginnings of the adventure.”148

The soldier coming home was no less a problem in 1944. Although there is little evidence to suggest that war veterans were really more violent or antisocial than individuals otherwise affected by World War II, a moral panic around the soldier, his training, and the imagined difficulty of his reentry into ordinary life began to gather steam early in the war.149 In newspapers, magazines, and popular films the image of the poorly adjusted or, indeed, the sociopathic veteran appeared again and again. The *Daily Mail* suggested that perhaps “men ‘trained in the use of lethal weapons [had lost] some of their normal inhibitions against the taking of human life.’” They’ve been trained in lawlessness, ordered to behave like thugs, and decorated for doing it . . . what do you expect?” was (as the *New Statesman* suggested) by 1946 becoming conventional wisdom.150 Another observer noted “that ‘paratroops have been trained as all-in-wrestlers and boxers, and Dacoits who can kill by the quick twist of a cord. Yet,’ he mused, ‘we shall expect all these
lads to be well-behaved and docile post-war.’ Good Housekeeping magazine warned its readers that their homecoming husbands had been transformed into ‘mechanized men, trained to do one thing only—kill the enemy.’” In other words, in 1944 Pistol’s direct address to the camera would not only have read as structural recognition of the minorness of the minor character or as a reflection on the life of the early modern camp follower but also as a warning or, indeed, a threat delivered directly from a figure conjured out of late war and then early postwar anxiety. In other words, to see Pistol in 1944 was to see an excess that was more than merely formal; it was to see the figure of a soldier who in a very real sense could not come home but nonetheless does come home.

**Unfit to Serve**

Olivier’s *Henry V* is, indeed, splendid propaganda. It is also one of several films that were released near the end of the war or after the war that work to represent the difficulty that men and women had adjusting to life after the losses and social dislocations of the war. We might think of Powell and Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), where Squadron Leader Peter Carter survives a crash landing only to find that he had suffered brain damage. As a result, he needs to work through an elaborate and impossible fantasy of a court case in heaven before he can truly live again on earth. Carol Reed’s *Odd Man Out* (1947) and *The Third Man* (1949) both work to embody the position of someone whose actions or commitments have unsuited them for everyday life. In the first case, James Mason’s character Johnny is an IRA fighter just out of prison; an apparently hysterical case of blindness interrupts bank robbery, which in turn makes him a fugitive not only from justice but also from other people. In *The Third Man*, Harry Lime’s absurd role as the mysterious third man at the scene of his own faked death reveals the degree to which the necessary complicities of wartime threatened to put people at odds with the world and with themselves: “Who is the third who walks always beside you?” In Powell and Pressburger’s uncharacteristically noir *The Small Back Room* (1949), David Farrar plays Sammy Rice, a military researcher whose loss of a leg has driven him to self-pity and alcohol; he, too, appears to have been broken by the war. In Cavalcanti’s *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947), Trevor Howard plays an RAF veteran whose desperate thrill-seeking leads him to join a gang of crooks smuggling and selling war rations. While the “they” of the title ostensibly refers to the double-dealing members of his gang who frame him for murder, it might equally refer to a whole culture that sent him emotionally unpre-
pared to war. A similar and surprising case can also be made about David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945), as I will demonstrate in the next chapter.

The world that Pistol resists is thus a propaganda world, a world with little time for a magnificent ruin of a man like Robert Newton. As I have suggested, Robert Newton was not a product or a symbol of postwar affluence. Unlike Richard Burton, Peter O’Toole, and Oliver Reed, he did his drinking during wartime, and, as many of his directors knew, it resulted in a particularly chaotic and deeply self-destructive kind of unfitness. This is complicated by the nature of total war, a kind of war that saw not only combat but also all manner of civilian activity as a direct, if obscure part of the war effort. To choose unfitness—to choose to be unfit to serve—during a time of total commitment and total war is arguably to live a self-destructive argument about war that would have been impossible otherwise to make.

In other words, what Olivier saw in Newton was a great actor whose notoriously bad behavior acted as an implicit interpretation of Shakespeare’s character and thus his whole play. Casting is, in these terms, an aspect of cinematic technique and thus of cinematic form; in this instance, casting works tacitly against a totalizing view of both war and cinema that Olivier’s film might seem otherwise to support. The world of total war is the world of a young, charming, and callow king, a king who would feign fellowship, execute prisoners, and pursue war for its own sake. It is also a world with little room for the drunks, the clowns, and the soldiers who neither return as heroes nor have the decency simply to die. And it is, as Olivier and his film understand, a world from which, Falstaff, Pistol, Will Kemp, George Robey, Orson Welles, and Robert Newton would not go, or at least not quietly.