

**Assessing the Accuracy of Representations of the Battle of
Agincourt in Film: *The King* (2019), *Henry V* (1989), and
Henry V (1944).**

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Introduction

Entertainment representation of historical events can be a major contributor to how those events are remembered in the public psyche. Films and tv shows with historical settings are sometimes the only exposure a layman has to an event. So, assessing the quality of these pieces of media is important both from a historical perspective and from an arts perspective. How well does a film convey the truth of an event? How accurate is it in the details of the portrayal? These are important questions to consider. The battle of Agincourt is one such event where most people are not familiar with the historical events of the battle, but many have been exposed to the idea of the battle through media. The three most prominent of these media representations are *The King*, a 2019 film starring Timothee Chalamet, the 1989 Kenneth Branagh *Henry V*, and the 1944 Lawrence Olivier *Henry V*. The battle of Agincourt is central to these films and because they occupy such a significant space in the public perception of the battle, viewers should know which aspects are accurate and which are not.

The Battle of Agincourt in *The King*

The portrayal of the battle of Agincourt in the 2019 Netflix original film *The King* is in broad strokes accurate to our knowledge of the historical battle but is lacking in several critical aspects. As it occurs on screen the flow of the battle is this: A small English force of Henry's heavily armored soldiers fight on foot in a small company at the front. A force of English longbowmen stands behind and on the rear flanks of the armored band of the front. On his right flank, Henry leads a force of light infantry hidden in the trees of the hillside. The French are arrayed in lines of heavily armored cavalry on an overlooking hill. To begin the battle, the

English armored footmen make a slow advance towards the hill, which provokes a charge of French heavy cavalry. As the cavalry come into range, they are thinned out by the English archers, and the charge is broken on the English line. A melee ensues between armored men in the mud, followed by a second charge of the remnants of the French cavalry. This charge is also met by fire from longbows, and then a counter charge from the flank by Henry and his light infantry. This critical maneuver allows the English take advantage of the French disarray to kill the downed knights. As the battle is concluding in the English favor, the dauphin arrives and challenges Henry to single combat, only to fall in the mud and be stabbed to death by Henry's men. The final scene of the battle is during the aftermath, where one of Henry's men comes up and warns Henry that if the French army regroups, they will not be able to control their prisoners. In response, Henry orders all the French prisoners to be killed.

So, how does this portrayal stack up? Let's begin with the order of battle. In the film, the English fight completely dismounted, with their only heavily armored men serving in the false advance. While there was a core of billmen at the English front, there was also cavalry at the wings of the formation of archers.¹ While this portrayal is inaccurate, it isn't hard to see why filmmakers would make this decision. By removing the English cavalry, which in the historical battle served mostly in the route chasing down fleeing enemies, the emphasis on English footmen and archers is brought to the fore. Nevertheless, there were English horsemen at Agincourt. Henry himself fought mounted, which brings us to the matter of his location during the battle. In the film, Henry leads the hidden English infantry, and joins the fray during their

¹ "Account of Agincourt." The National Archives, October 21, 2015.
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/agincourt/campaign-and-battle/account-of-agincourt-page-1/>. P.1

counter charge, wading into the battle on foot and unguarded. In reality, Henry led the armored footmen, fought mounted and with a personal guard.

Another inaccuracy comes in the preparation of the battlefield. In the film, the English rely on the rain of the previous night having turned the field to mud, while in reality there was careful preparation that allowed the English to make the best use of their forces. A ditch was dug in front of the hidden archers so as to prevent a French charge against them once they were revealed, and long iron spikes were placed in front of the main formation of archers to prevent the French cavalry from charging them directly and encircling the footmen.² It is unclear why the film exempts these critical aspects of the battle. It is possible that the film makers chose to dramatize the risk of the English gamble by having the entire battle rest of whether it rained the previous night, and while this may be beneficial to the development of the characters in the film, it detracts from the portrayal. There is a glaring moment when the French cavalry is charging down the hill at the English footmen, and there is nothing to stop them directly charging the archers and encircling the footmen.

The post battle scene where Henry has his prisoners put to death may be the most problematic coloring of the real history that occurs in the film. In the fictional scene, we are intended to see Henry ordering prisoners killed out of hand as a sign of his callousness as he grows and discovers what it takes to be a medieval king. After the order is given, there is no further mention of the massacre and an unassuming audience would be led to believe that the execution of noble prisoners was a routine occurrence in medieval warfare. This is very much not the case. Omitted in the film, because the climax has passed and the order to execute the

² "Account of Agincourt." P.1

prisoners takes place in the falling action, is the actual attack on the English baggage train by French cavalry which occurred during the end of the battle.³ This attack after the battle was seemingly over was the triggering incident that caused the execution of French prisoners, out of fear that they would rejoin the fight. This was very much not routine. As any student of medieval warfare will know, the ransoming of wealthy captives was common practice during the high and late medieval period, and was a major source of the wealth accumulated through war. By ordering the execution of French prisoners, Henry was seen as not only killing those who had already surrendered, which was taboo, but arguably worse for his image he deprived his soldiers of their rightful spoils. In the film adaptation, it's understandable from an entertainment point of view why the French attack on the baggage train was excluded in favor of a short dialogue. The battle is over, the main action of the film is done, Henry has just lost Falstaff, and there is only twenty minutes of film left. It would detract from the film to add another action scene in the aftermath of the battle as presented. At that point in the film, all the filmmakers wanted to say about the battle had been said. Never mind that the English cavalry which chased down the French attackers was fully excluded from the film. This is all to say that the film has good reasons not to include a baggage train scene. Very good reasons in fact. But however good the reasons for it are, the fact remains that there is a complete reversal of the historical truth of Henry's decision which undermines the otherwise quite good artistic interpretation of the battle in a favor of a fantasy bleaker than the real events. The cultural trend towards grittiness and darkness in medieval settings present in recent years, of which the tv show *A Game of Thrones* is the greatest exemplar, is clear throughout the film. *The King* even directly steals a shot from a battle in the show's sixth season. Overall, the trend is useful to the film by providing an

³ "Account of Agincourt." P.2

atmosphere conducive to the reality of medieval war. In this instance however, the attachment to a darker interpretation has a negative impact.

When examining the arms and armor present at Agincourt and their representation in *The King*, there are three types of soldiers to be assessed separately: the English billmen, the English Archers, and the French cavalry. We have already noted that the English cavalry is wholly excluded from the film, and so we have no basis for comparison. By the early fifteenth century, when the battle of Agincourt was fought, plate was the dominant form of personal body armor for the wealthy soldier, and had replaced chain armor for any who could afford it.⁴ In the film, we see the English billmen, who are described by the film as dismounted knights, as well as the French cavalry, in full plate armor. The portrayal of the heavy armor on these soldiers is exceptional and accurate to both the plate that was used at the time and the effect of the plate on the soldiers wearing it. The protection offered by plate armor was such that shields were no longer in common use and instead weapons were held two handed.⁵ We see this represented both in the English billmen and the French cavalry, though we will return to the specific arms later. Surcoats were also removed from an armored man's ensemble in favor of the shining metal of his plate armor (though in the film we do see a few surcoats amongst the French cavalry), which brings us to the largest inaccuracy of the plate armor portrayed in *The King*: it's grimy. At the beginning of the battle, as portrayed, the plate armor of both the French and the English is filthy and tarnished, as if it had been neglected for an extended period of time and then wheeled out for battle without preparation. Quite simply, that is not how plate armor was treated or what it looked like. Early 15th century steel processing techniques produced a high shine finish on plate,

⁴ Kelly Devries, and Robert Douglas Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. P. 78

⁵ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 89-90.

which is why surcoats stopped being worn over it. The glimmer of the polished plate was prettier. Wearing beautiful armor, together with the high cost and added protection, was one of the main reasons the wealthy wore plate armor in battle.⁶ While the dirtiness of the plate armor in the film is used to build upon its dark themes and emphasize the grittiness of medieval war, dirty plate armor before a battle is an inaccuracy that not only misrepresents the immediate image of the battle to the viewer, but also obfuscates the cultural relevance of the armor itself. Of course, when the battle begins and the armored men are fighting in the mud their armor would be filthy, and the potential impact of a transition from gleaming steel to dented and filthy armor, underlining the same grittiness the film strives for, is lost.

The arms of the French cavalry depicted in *The King* are strange to say the least. The most striking aspect of the French arms is their uniformity. With the exception of several standard bearers who carry lances adorned with pennants, every single French horseman is primarily armed with a longsword. This is wildly inaccurate. For heavy cavalry on the charge, the winged lance dominated the battlefields of medieval Europe. Armor and shields were specifically designed to accommodate the couched lance position on the charge, and the penetration power of the lance was unmatched on the medieval battlefield.⁷ The fact that we see only a handful of lances is a strange and unjustified exclusion. Lances aside, what we do have to analyze in the arms of the French cavalry is an abundance of longswords. It worth noting that in addition to not being the primary arm, not every horseman would carry a longsword as a close combat weapon. French knights at Agincourt owned their own equipment, and would have used the weapons they preferred. They were not uniformly equipped. Some may have favored axes or

⁶Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 79.

⁷ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 11-12, 81, 89.

maces or war hammers. But the weapons we see are all longswords, and whether this was a necessity of production in the prop department, or a choice by the filmmakers, it is not reflective of the historical facts. But back to longswords. Before we approach the use of these weapons, we should address their design, which is lacking. By the time plate armor became common in medieval Europe, about 1330 onward, the longsword had evolved from a slashing to thrusting weapon.⁸ While a slashing attack could be effective against chain and lighter armors, it was not suitable against an enemy armored in plate. So, as the usage changed longswords were adapted to better serve their new purpose. Their points became more tapered, the blades narrowed, the cross section became diamond or hexagonal, and the grip was extended for one or two handed use.⁹ These changes are not reflected in the arms of the film. The French longswords are wide bladed weapons with little tapering and a harshly angled point altogether unsuitable for piercing through heavy armor. The longswords shown in the film would look more at home on a battlefield in the year 1000.

The arms of the English billmen, the dismounted men at arms, are both simple and accurate. The armored footmen wield a mix of polearms with smaller side arms such as swords, maces, daggers, and axes. The polearms are braced to receive the French charge and strike at the French horses and mounted knights, while the smaller weapons are used once the melee is joined and the larger polearms become unwieldy. Here, the film succeeds in many of the places it fails with the arms of the French cavalry. The weapons are varied, and accurate to their period. Polearms were the chosen heavy infantry weapon of the late middle ages, and those in the film are used correctly: in a tight infantry formation meant to receive charges.¹⁰ The main failing of

⁸ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 22, 78.

⁹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 78.

¹⁰ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 28.

the arms of the English billman is once again of the design of the swords used, though there are several shots of these weapons being ineffectual at slashing plate. While such ineffectual weapons would not have been used, it does serve to demonstrate why they wouldn't have been, and so we can still benefit from these shots even though they are historically inaccurate.

The armor of the English soldiers acting in a dual role as archers and light infantry as portrayed in *The King* is very accurate to the history with few errors. The archers wear an extremely varied mix of both helmets and armor, ranging from what seems to be simple tunics with no form of armor beyond clothing, to quilted jackets, skull caps, kettle hats, conical helms, chain, brigandine, jack of plates and breastplates. These armors are both accurate to what would have been available at the time and, most importantly, are not uniform. Armor would have been acquired by each individual soldier and what quality of protection they could afford varied.¹¹ The very wealthiest of the infantry, represented in the film by Henry and his cadre¹² are armored in chain shirts, coifs, and breastplates. They serve well both to show the disparity between the wealthy and the poor infantrymen and as examples of how various forms of armor would be worn in tandem, with one exceptional flaw: they don't wear helmets. While they wears are somewhat protected by their mail coifs, a helmet was one of the most critical components of armor, and even the very poorest would attempt to procure one if they could afford it.¹³ Chain simply would not provide the necessary protection to the head by itself, and though a coif would be useful to protect from slashing attacks to the neck, it would not be used as the primary armor of the head. This inaccuracy is almost certainly a choice made because Henry is placed in the

¹¹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 85.

¹² As we have already mentioned, Henry's armor here is inaccurate to the battle, but he is useful as an example of a wealthy infantryman.

¹³ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 85.

infantry. The most common infantry helmet of the time, the kettle hat, would have obscured the actor's face and eyes much more than the mail coif because of its wide brim.¹⁴ During the battle Henry pulls down his coif so we can see even more of his face and head. This is an unsurprising ploy. Falstaff also removes his helmet earlier in the battle so we can see his full face. It's hard to fault the filmmakers for wanting to have their actors' faces visible so they can act, but it is unfortunate that this choice mars an otherwise very good portrayal of late medieval infantry armor.

The weapons of the English archers are similarly accurate. They are seen armed with longbows, a weapon infamous for its use by medieval English armies, along with close quarters weapons such as daggers, axes, swords, war picks, hammers, and even a few polearms. The types of armament, primarily piercing and bludgeoning weapons meant to kill a man in full plate, along with the non homogeneity of the melee weapons and standardization of the longbows are all accurate to history. As mentioned above, soldiers would be armed with what weapons they preferred and could afford. The exception to this variance, but not accuracy, is the longbow, which every archer would be necessarily armed with. The exception to the accuracy of the English light infantry's arms is once again the longsword, and for one of the same reasons it is inaccurate for the French cavalry: the design of the swords is out of date, meant for slashing not thrusting. The use of the English archers' arms is also a boon to the film. A myth exists that the English longbow was so powerful that it would pierce plate in battle. This is false, with the exception of a lucky hit to one of the armor's joints.¹⁵ As portrayed in the film and in history, the primary function of the longbow is to kill horses and harass and weaken a charge before it is

¹⁴ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 87.

¹⁵ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P.39.

received by a staunch line of dismounted men at arms, causing chaos that when the charge is unable to break the line of billmen.¹⁶ The use of the light infantry's close combat weapons is also accurate. There are no plate armored men dying after being tapped on the chest by a sword. The killing is done by either brute force with bludgeoning, or by stabbing into the joints of plate armor with piercing weapons. The shots that follow Henry repeatedly show him piercing downed knights with a small pointed dagger, a design accurate to the time, and which is accurate to how plate armor could be defeated. Overall, the weapons of the light infantry/archers and their use in the battle is an exceptional demonstration on late medieval warfare, and specifically the tactics practiced by the English during the time period.

The Battle of Agincourt in *Henry V* (1989)

The battle of Agincourt as we see it in the 1989 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V* is in stark contrast to the portrayal previously examined in *The King*, which helps illustrate the different successes and failings of each film. The most striking feature of the 1989 film is the complete lack of high angle shots or aerial views of the battle. The cinematography is character centric, following the individual fights taking place on the field rather than showing the battle through formation movements. The choice to use only close angle shots means we see less of the battle, and the entire action feels as though it could take place in a living room. In terms of historical representation and the ability of the film to convey the events of the battle, the lack of wide shots is a negative. While this is not an irredeemable flaw, and certainly was made for good reasons which likely included budgeting and the desire to focus on the central actors in a Shakespeare adaptation, it does make the movements of the soldiers more difficult to parse.

¹⁶ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 40.

There are no real formations to be seen, and there are very rarely more than a dozen to half a dozen people in any given frame. The combatants on both sides are disorderly clumps bumping and mixing with each other. In the immediate beginning of the battle, English soldiers are seen rushing about, noticeably past the front of their line of spikes which is perhaps a cinematic convenience in order to produce a dramatic shot of the narrator approaching the camera perpendicular to the flow of men while showing the length of the front line. Such an a movement was certainly not present in history. Once the English archers have assumed their positions, the French make their charge. The first volley of English arrows is loosed, and then a body of English Cavalry which seems to be the front rank of Henry's center meet the charge of the French. A second English volley is loosed while the French and English cavalry are in close combat. Five more follow, for a total of seven volleys. The melee continues in the mud and water. The French are shown to be losing, and Henry somehow gets off his horse, as do almost all the combatants. The exception being a small group of French cavalry who ride away from the battle and are shown to have burned the baggage train, killing many young boys who are likely meant to portray squires and pages. While Henry is fuming over the attack, a French herald come to speak with him and Henry discovers the battle is won for the English. So, of the movements of the battle which are included, which are representative of history, and which are not? The battle initiating with a French charge and in response the English archers fired upon the French cavalry. The order of evens here is muddled. The first attack of the battle came from Henry's hidden archers, which are entirely excluded from the film. In history, their early shots against the French army provoked the first charge of the battle, which was met by more English arrows. The portrayal here is not wrong, but it is misleading. Henry's main force of archers did fire on the French after the French charged, but the French charged in response to the hidden archers firing

on them.¹⁷ No billmen are present in the film. In history, they were front and center, the rock against which the arrow-frazzled French cavalry finally broke.¹⁸ In the film, their place is taken by a company of cavalry lead by Henry, which instead of holding their position against the French charge, counter charge. In this film, Henry is in the right place, but he is leading the wrong people. As previously stated, Henry lead the billmen in his center, from horseback and with a cadre of bodyguards. So his positioning is partially correct. What is absolutely not correct, is the portrayal of Henry charging into the French cavalry while his archers were still firing into their ranks. Once the French hit the English lines, the English archers dropped their bows and switched to melee weapons.¹⁹ We never see this in the film. Once the longbowmen cease shooting, they are absent.

At this point the battle becomes a disorganized frenzy as previously noted. The angles are close, and all the soldiers are mixed in with each other. But there are yet two discernable events in the battle which are contrary to fact. First and less important, is that Henry ends up fighting dismounted. The historical account mentions Henry as nearly knocked off his horse several times, but not that he ever was, or that he chose to dismount to fight on foot.²⁰ Second, there is a grand event made of the French attack on the baggage train and no mention or portrayal of Henry's execution of the prisoners. One of Henry's captains claims to attack the baggage train is the worst offense that can be offered, which is a source of much irony. Much ado is made of the attack on the baggage train, while the atrocity which Agincourt is remembered for, the atrocity which is used in political classrooms as an example of a premodern war crime, the execution of

¹⁷ "Account of Agincourt." P.2.

¹⁸ "Account of Agincourt." P.2.

¹⁹ "Account of Agincourt." P.2.

²⁰ "Account of Agincourt." Pp.1-3.

the prisoners on Henry's orders is completely ignored. Not even a nod is tipped towards the event, voiding the English of any possible guilt. The exclusion of this critical part of Agincourt's history has two sources. Shakespeare did not include it in his play, and the film makers of the 1989 adaptation chose not to insert any reference to it in their adaptation. Shakespeare's choice is understandable, in the 16th century France was still England's great rival and Shakespeare was a public figure. Bad mouthing the English monarchy has traditionally been seen as unwise. But why did the filmmakers of the late '80s choose to preserve this revisionist story? An argument could be made that the choice reflects a desire to keep true to Shakespeare's original work, valuing the fidelity of the film to the play over the fidelity of the film to the events. But another compelling reason exists, which is that in 1989 the United Kingdom was in the depths of the Troubles. England was under scrutiny on the world stage for crimes committed against the people of Ireland, and there were strong divisions within both countries about the situation. A film which addressed possibly the most famous English war crime and juxtaposed it with one of the most patriotic works of English art could not be made in that time without being seen as taking a side in the Troubles. The safe route for the filmmakers was to let the silence remain, and that is what they did.

While the reduced scale relative to *The King* emphasizes the failings of the 1989 *Henry V* in that regard, the film does succeed in portraying the order of battle in some places where its more modern counterpart fails. Though the 1989 film does not portray true formations or even the general shape of the battlefield, what it does have is battlefield preparation. Front and center in the English side of the battle, so long as it is distinguishable as the fighting does become very disorganized, are huge wooden spikes. In the historical battle these spikes were iron and were placed in front of the main formation archers, but because there is no real formation placement

shown the film there are a hodge-podge of different soldiers all scattered throughout the spikes.²¹ Though the role the English battlefield preparation played in the English victory at Agincourt is not wholly conveyed by their counterparts in *Henry V*, they are certainly a welcome and beneficial inclusion, especially since they are excluded from *The King*, which otherwise is more diligent in its tactical portrayal.

The other part of the portrayal of the order of battle where *Henry V* succeeds and *The King* fails is the placement of Henry himself. Henry's actual location in unfortunately undefinable because of the small scale and lack of formations, but the major success is that Henry is fighting mounted accompanied by armored and mounted bodyguards, as he was in history.²²

The equipment of the English cavalry portrayed in *Henry V* (1989) is mixed. The most notable and most damning feature is the complete lack of lances. Even though Henry's cavalry forces were smaller than those of the French, the lance was still the primary weapon of shock cavalry in the early fifteenth century.²³ Instead, the cavalry are all armed with longswords and shields, with the exception of Duke Thomas, who wields a mace. Though falling out of favor generally, shields were still used by cavalry at this time.²⁴ The uniformity however, is out of place. Every cavalryman would not use a longsword, as previously discussed regarding the equipment of the French cavalry in *The King*, but would rather have used the melee weapon they personally favored. Despite the inaccuracy of uniformity, the longswords present in *Henry V* (1989) are of the type which would have been used during the historical battle. These are clearly

²¹ "Account of Agincourt." P.1

²² "Account of Agincourt." P.2

²³ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp.12-15.

²⁴ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 89-90.

piercing weapons, elongated with a steep taper to a stabbing point designed to find and puncture the weaknesses in the heavy armor of the day.²⁵ Duke Thomas' use of a flanged mace is a boon to the film. His armament gives a hint of the diversity of weaponry the English cavalry otherwise sorely lacks, in addition to providing an example of the blunt weapons that became more popular alongside piercing weapons as the effectiveness of slashing weapons decreased with the rise of plate armor.²⁶

Duke Thomas is similarly an exception to the somewhat off target armoring of the English cavalry portrayed in the film. Thomas is the only English horseman wearing plate. We know both that in the early fifteenth century plate was the preferred armor of the wealthy soldier, which the English cavalry were, and that there were many suits of plate in Henry's Great Wardrobe.²⁷ The remainder of Henry's cavalry is seen wearing suits of chain with open faced conical helmets. Both of these armors were out of date at the time of the battle of Agincourt.²⁸ Duke Thomas does not wear a helmet, his head is only protected by a chain hood which is of course inaccurate. But as we have seen before, filmmakers sometimes have an aversion to putting face-covering helmets on their actors for artistic reasons. A visored helmet stops the actor's main tool, their face, from being seen. This is likely why no English cavalry wear proper helmets in the film.

The French cavalry has a somewhat more accurate portrayal of the equipment they would have used during the battle. Their greatest success in contrast to the English cavalry's equipment is the inclusion of lances. Every French cavalryman is shown wielding a lance and shield during

²⁵ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 22, 78.

²⁶ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 31.

²⁷ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P. 24.

²⁸ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 77-78, 87-88.

the initial charge, which is representative of how shock cavalry would have been armed at the time.²⁹ Later in the battle, once the charge has been broken and the melee has begun, we see the French armed with swords and sometimes shields and even a few daggers. As with the English cavalry noted above, the longsword would not be the universal secondary weapon, but those longswords we do see used are accurate in design to the time.³⁰ The armor of the French cavalry is similar to that of the English, with a few notable differences. Most wear the same chain covered in surcoats which by the time of Agincourt would have been out of date for nobility.³¹ The Constable and his inner circle are the exception to the failings of the French armor as Duke Thomas is to the English. Most of them wear plate armor which was the standard of the time.³² Despite this, several of them are completely lacking helmets, or wear the same open faced conical helms as other cavalrymen. The Constable himself wears a pig faced bascinet with a visor which is accurate.³³ At the beginning of the battle, he shuts his visor making a distinctive clapping noise, so even if we don't see them, we know more Frenchmen are wearing visored helmets. The most glaring flaw in the Constable's equipment is that while he is wearing a helmet, his helmet is not equipped with an aventail, the chain which would drape down from the bottom of the helmet to protect the neck. The result is the somewhat silly display of a man in plate armor with his whole neck and lower chin exposed. Were it not for this glaring flaw, the Constable of France would be the most accurate portrayal of a French cavalryman in the film.

As for the equipment of Henry himself, the 1989 film presents a mixed bag at best. Henry is shown wearing no helmet of any kind, and vambraces and a gorget which could be studded

²⁹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp.12-15.

³⁰ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 22, 78.

³¹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 78-79.

³² Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 78-79.

³³ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 87-88.

leather or brigandine, leather gloves, leather or cloth pants, leather boots, and a piece of body armor that could be quilted armor or brigandine covered by a decorative heraldic jupon. The quality of the portrayal wavers from mixed if we are charitable in our interpretation of Henry's costume by assuming the vambraces, gorget and chest piece are brigandine, to abysmal if we are not. The most astounding and obvious failing of Henry's armor is the lack of helmet. Henry does not wear one despite being in the midst of battle, and the customary lip service of cinema removing the main character's helmet halfway through a battle sequence so the actor's face is visible is not even considered. Henry, whose head is the most important one on the battlefield, lets it go unprotected. While *Henry V* is a Shakespeare adaptation and clearly refused to deprive Kenneth Branagh of his primary acting tool by covering it with an expressionless helmet for good artistic reasons, it is still jarring to see the king of England go into battle without so much as a skullcap, when historically he likely would have worn a great bascinet. The assertion that Henry likely wore a great bascinet is based in two facts. First, that the bascinet was the dominant helmet of the time and was extremely common.³⁴ Second, the receipts of Henry's great wardrobe pertaining to the equipment for him and his inner circle overwhelmingly lists bascinets almost exclusively in regard to helmets.³⁵

The other area of Henry's armor which is inexcusably lacking is the peripherals: his legs and arms. Henry's legs are protected only by leather boots and pants, a ridiculous state given his fighting on horseback where the legs are exceptionally exposed. Henry's legs would have been armored with greaves and cuisses of plate and mail at least, and it is likely a pair of decorated

³⁴ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp.87-88.

³⁵ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. April 9, 2015. *Arms & Armour*, Volume. 12, Issue 1.P.24.

greaves listed in the great wardrobe belonged to Henry.³⁶ As for the arms, even if we concede that Henry's vambraces are brigandine, he is still lacking pauldrons for his shoulders and gauntlets for his hands.³⁷ As for his main body armor, we know Henry possessed at least one set of brigandine from the records of his great wardrobe, though it is unclear if that brigandine was his or was worn by one of his inner circle.³⁸ So, it is possible that Henry wore brigandine, but given there is only one suit of brigandine and many more suits of plate in the records of the great wardrobe, it more likely Henry wore plate.³⁹

Henry's weaponry is at least half right. From his armorer's receipts we know there were several swords designated specifically as belonging to the king, and while many other weapons are catalogued, none, with the exception of a baselard, were attributed personally to Henry.⁴⁰ As such, the film's depiction of Henry wielding a sword in the battle of Agincourt is likely correct. The sword Henry is seen wielding is slightly thin and tapered to a point, which is indicative of the swords of the period which had been made into thrusting rather than cutting instruments.⁴¹ His use of a shield however, is slightly more dubious. As previously noted, by the early 15th century shields were out of favor for warriors who by that time were so sufficiently protected by the advancements in plate armor that they favored a second hand to grip their weapon over a shield. This trend was slightly behind amongst cavalry, meaning it is possible Henry used a shield at Agincourt, but it is unlikely.⁴²

³⁶ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P.24.

³⁷ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P. 24.

³⁸ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P. 24.

³⁹ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P. 24.

⁴⁰ Richardson, Thom. *Armour in Henry V'S Great Wardrobe*. P. 23.

⁴¹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 22.

⁴² Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 89-90.

The Battle of Agincourt in *Henry V* (1944)

The armor Lawrence Olivier wears as King Henry in the 1944 adaptation of *Henry V* is quite frankly, beautiful. He wears full shining plate, a heraldic surcoat, and a visored helm. All this armor is not only well fitted to him and an excellent example of the mechanical aspects of early 15th century plate, but also a reminder that in addition to being a warrior Henry is a king.⁴³ His armor glistens, his helm has a golden crown atop it. His colors are prominent on his chest, and he is the riding embodiment of the glory of kingship. Henry's depiction here is indicative of the film as a whole. In both *The King* and the 1989 *Henry V* adaptation there is an intentional layer of grit and darkness added to the film. There is no such darkness in the 1944 adaptation. The colors are bright, the metal shines in the sun. Armor and weapons are clean and beautiful, and flags wave proudly in the wind. The reasoning for these choices is not hard to grasp. The film was made during the second world war. People had had enough of darkness and dirt. No one needed to be reminded of the horrors of war. They had been living through them for years. *Henry V* 1944 is unabashedly a propaganda film, with patriotic shots of the English flag waving in the wind. Despite the negative connotations of propaganda, especially when it comes to portrayals of history, the fact that *Henry V* is a propaganda film actually works in its favor in terms of accurately portraying the battle of Agincourt.

As for weapons, Henry uses a sword only. As previously mentioned, we know Henry likely used a sword during the battle from the records of his Great Wardrobe, which mentions a sword and baselard as the only weapons specifically for Henry. The use of a sword without a shield would not have been uncommon during this time. Warriors of the time were forgoing

⁴³ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 78-80.

shields because of the great effectiveness of their armor.⁴⁴ The design of the sword Henry uses is appropriate to the battle, long and tapered, meant to pierce.⁴⁵ One flaw in Henry's equipment one may notice is the lack of a lance. We have noted repeatedly that the lance was the primary weapon of shock cavalry at the time of Agincourt, and so it would seem that since Henry is outfitted as an armored cavalryman he should have a lance. In the film however, Henry never participates in a cavalry charge, which is the only situation where a lance would be used.⁴⁶ Rather, Henry is seen acting more in a commanding role. In the historical battle, Henry did just this. He led billmen with a mounted bodyguard. Because Henry acted as a commander of infantry, it makes sense that he would not be armed with a lance, since he would not be able to use it effectively without charging. Overall, the equipment of Henry in the 1944 adaptation of *Henry V* is the best in all three films we have analyzed.

The French cavalry's equipment is very similarly to Henry's. They wear plate armor which just like Henry's is clean, beautiful, and made to impress as well as protect. Some wear heraldic surcoats, and some do not, as the fashion was in flux at the time.⁴⁷ On the charge, the French horsemen are armed with shields and lances, as they would have been in history. There is a good mix of secondary weapons visible. Maces, swords, long daggers can all be seen amongst the French. The most glaring problem with the equipment of the French cavalry is the presence of several prominently visible horsemen who are wearing heavy armor everywhere but their hands, which are either completely bare or have their wrists exposed. Needless to say such a lack of gauntlets is wildly inaccurate, but it likely was not a choice made by the film makers and

⁴⁴ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. Pp. 89-90.

⁴⁵ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 22.

⁴⁶ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 13.

⁴⁷ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 78-79.

rather a mistake on set. From the general quality of the armor worn by actors in the film it is clear that the costumes department had done their research and would not have intentionally left gauntlets out of their armor sets. The battle in the film is massive, with hundreds of people on screen. A much more probable scenario is that due to the scale of the film, several extras lost their gauntlets, or took them off between takes and forgot to put them back on. While the mistake may have been noticed by the editors later, the expense of reshooting the scenes in which the gauntlet-less extras appear would have been prohibitively expensive to an already massive production. So, we may forgive the lack of gauntlets as a mistake in an otherwise very high quality portrayal of what the French cavalry would have looked like at Agincourt. The English cavalry portrayed in the film is much the same as the French, and as such is of similar high quality. Wearing various qualities of plate armor and armed with lances, shields and many different secondary weapons.

The armor and weaponry of the English archers is very accurate. There is a mix of armor ranging from kettle-hat with full chain down to the chausses, to a mere leather jerkin. This variation would have been due to each individual soldier purchasing the armor he could afford. Archers would have been enlisted from the lower classes and many would not have had the funds to purchase quality protective gear.⁴⁸ The archers are armed with the eponymous longbows as their primary weapon, and with long thrusting daggers as secondary weapons. The only glaring flaw in the portrayal of the English archers is one particular scene in the battle where French cavalymen charge into the woods and English archers that have climbed into the trees jumped down on the cavalymen to drag them from their horses. This action is both inaccurate and ridiculous. No French cavalry charged into the woods at Agincourt, as they were prevented by

⁴⁸ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 85.

the ditch dug to protect the hidden archers.⁴⁹ Furthermore, it would be ridiculous to have ones soldiers climbing trees during a battle. The filmmakers were clearly trying to evoke similar events in the extremely successful 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood* which had come out six years earlier. The result is probably the most egregious flaw in the accuracy of the film.

Though there is limited screen time for the English billmen, what we do see of them is promising. The billmen are armed with long polearms which were the default for infantry at the time.⁵⁰ They are armored with kettle hats, suits of chain, and plain surcoats. The armor of a billman in the early 15th century would have varied greatly depending on his wealth, ranging from (in very rare cases) full plate, all the way down to a simple quilted jacket, including brigandine and jack of plates.⁵¹ Unfortunately due to the limited screentime, we don't see such variance of armor. There are no close ups focusing on the infantry, and the few shots they are in last only a few seconds, making it very difficult to distinguish types of armor under the colored surcoats worn over them. While there isn't anything to be picked out as wildly inaccurate in the equipment of the English billmen, it is mostly because of how little we see of them.

The tactical portrayal of the battle is the weakest part of the film. As previously mentioned, the frankly ridiculous archers-in-trees situation is the worst of the film's blunders. The remainder of the tactics portrayed are not much better, with the exception of the very beginning of the battle. There is an establishing shot of the whole field which shows the formations, the landscape and the camps, and this shot is the peak of the tactical representation. We see one row of English infantry, downhill from three rows of French with huge cavalry detachments on the flanks. Anyone who has seen a battle map of Agincourt will recognize these

⁴⁹ "Account of Agincourt." P.1

⁵⁰ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 28.

⁵¹ Devries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*. P. 85.

formations.⁵² Unfortunately, the tactical portrayal is downhill from there on out. The French cavalry advances, charges, and are met with English arrows. English cavalry counter charge, and there is a breakdown of coherency in the shots. It becomes very difficult to place where on the field any given shot is taking place, whose side cavalymen are on, and how the battle is going generally. It is a shame that the film falls on the last hurdle when so much good preparation in terms of equipment, weapons, and even the establishing shot has been done well. The chaos is so complete it is difficult to even ascertain what aspects of the tactics are good or bad. The film holds to the Shakespearean script of washing over the execution of the prisoners and emphasizing the dishonor of the French attack on the baggage train, as we have seen before in the 1989 version. As previously mentioned, this adaptation was made during the second world war, and is clearly and purposefully a work of propaganda. No one at the time wanted to see the British commit a war crime, and so it is left out.

Comparison

In terms of portraying the tactics accurately and the historical truth of the battle of Agincourt, *The King* is the best of these three films because the battle is treated tactically instead of being character focused. Both adaptations of *Henry V* fail here because they are character focused. The weight of importance in both films is given to the individuals on screen, not the armies as a whole. Why do the 1944 and 1989 films do this but *The King* does not? The primary reason is that they are both film adaptation's of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The play itself is focused on the characters, not the movements of the battle, and so without adding significant dialogue which would likely displease many Shakespeare scholars and enthusiasts, they cannot

⁵² Anne Curry, "Agincourt 1415-2015," *Historian* 77, no. 1 (2015): pp. 6-10,

engage the battle on the same level *The King* does. As art, this is perfectly acceptable. The filmmakers were concerned with adapting a source and while their styles differ, both remain loyal to the text. *The King*, being unfettered from Shakespeare though still undoubtedly influenced (Falstaff is a main character) is able to make the creative choices necessary to give the viewer a wholistic view of the battle, which the 1944 and 1989 films cannot. We get an in depth plan before the battle, clear tactical views, and a mention of the execution of the prisoners, even if it is flawed. For someone new to Agincourt and looking for a film that conveys the spirit of the battle, *The King* is the clear winner. The film decidedly concerns itself with telling the story of the battle alongside the story of Henry. An English army inferior in both numbers and quality of equipment destroys the opposing French army by using the battlefield and positioning to their advantage. And while *The King* does lack certain aspects which are critical to a full understanding, such as the preparation of the battlefield and Henry's role, the image of the battle presented is exceptionally accurate to the historical truth. If you watch *The King*, you will have a passable knowledge of the themes of the battle of Agincourt, which is why *The King* wins out as the best of the three films. The *Henry V* adaptations simply do not give enough attention to the battle itself as a historical event to give the viewer a definite sense of how it happened.

As for the accuracy of equipment the 1944 film is by far the best portrayal. Both the 1989 and 2019 film have a grim and dirty aesthetic while the 1944 film, as a work of clear and intentional propaganda, has a much more bright, colorful, and nationalistic image. As previously mentioned, this is good because it means the combatants are costumed to look clean and glorious which, for the upper class, is how they would have looked. Besides the propaganda factor, the equipment design is simply fantastic. Seeing such high quality plate armor is rare anywhere outside a museum. The arms and armor of the film are certainly the 1944 *Henry V*'s defining

aspect from a historical point of view. Where the 2019 and 1989 films both fail in portraying Henry's equipment, the 1944 adaptation also has the best depiction of Henry himself. Henry is armored in beautiful plate, mounted, and perhaps most relieving compared to the other two films, helmeted. *Henry V* is decidedly the film of choice if one is looking to see accurate arms and armor of the early 15th century. Not only as a film about the battle of Agincourt, but also in the whole of medieval-inspired film, the 1944 adaptation of *Henry V* has some of the best medieval arms and armor seen on screen.

While The 1944 and 2019 films both have outstanding aspects, from a historical perspective the 1989 *Henry V* adaptation is the worst. This is not an indictment of the film as a work of art or an adaptation. The 1989 film simply has other priorities. The tactics are muddled, the equipment is mixed at best, and at the end of the battle the viewer has no real sense of why battle went the way it did. Kenneth Branagh and Shakespeare fans will certainly enjoy the movie, but as vessel for the history of the battle of Agincourt the 1989 *Henry V* is unexceptional. The goal of the film was not to provide an accurate rendition of the battle of Agincourt, so while it would be unfair to condemn the film because it does not, we must acknowledge that through our lens the *Henry V* 1989 adaptation is surpassed both by the 1944 *Henry V* and *The King*.

Conclusion

So, our examination of the three portrayals of the battle of Agincourt in the 2019 film *The King* and the 1989 and 1944 adaptations of *Henry V* have shown the merits and flaws of each film, and how they stack up comparatively. *The King* has the best attention given to tactical accuracy and portrayal of the historical truth, while the 1944 *Henry V* has the best weapons and armor. The action of both *Henry V* adaptations is shot as to be near tactically indecipherable, with the 1944 version being the worse of the two in that regard. The aesthetics of both *The King*

and the 1989 *Henry V* are dark and gritty to the point of inaccuracy which is part of a rejection of the glorification of war present in both films. *The King* also draws inspiration from the contemporary trend toward a dark medieval style largely inspired by the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. The 1944 adaptation is stylistically the most conducive to an accurate portrayal in terms of color palette, costume and prop design because it is propaganda film made during the second world war and has no problem emulating the pomp and beauty which was intentionally cultivated at the time. All three films have a somewhat negligent portrayal of the preparation of the battlefield which is so important to events of the battle. Despite all the successes and failing of these films and the depth to which we have gone in attempting to define which is the best historical presentation of the battle of Agincourt, we must remember that at their core these films are entertainment, not academia. Each has its own agenda and context and, while they are useful visual tools in understanding and inspiring interest in the history or the battle of Agincourt, none are documentaries and should not be viewed as such.

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