

# *The King*: A film drama (insufficiently) inspired by Shakespeare's work

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*Directed by David Michôd; written by Michôd and Joel Edgerton*

William Shakespeare's famed Henriad, loosely based on events that took place during the 15th century, encompasses *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* and *Henry V*. The works chronicle the general ascension of the Lancaster branch of England's House of Plantagenet, recounting the complex political struggles, war—foreign and domestic—and endless treachery.

Inspired by Shakespeare's plays, *The King*, directed by David Michôd and written by Michôd and Joel Edgerton, is a Netflix historical drama broadly tracing the life of Henry V (1386–1422), with a vaguely anti-war coloring.

As the movie opens in the early 15th century, England is enmeshed in a civil war with Scotland, and the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) with France. Before long, Prince Hal (Timothée Chalamet), previously a wayward youth enjoying rude and even criminal company, assumes the throne following the death of his father, Henry IV (Ben Mendelsohn). One disgruntled villager quips: "A boy who but weeks ago was a drunken boor from the sewers of Eastcheap [in central London] now wears England's crown."

The new monarch, Henry V, is tired of his "father's madness" for "wars that need not be fought." He claims that "Civil strife has consumed us. The war drains the purse like little else. This strife must end. And it will end by conciliation. We shall pardon our adversaries."

But he is eventually goaded into war with France. In 1415, Henry and his army set sail for the continent. They successfully capture the town of Harfleur, but the month-long siege takes a heavy toll on the king's men. The film's core is the sanguinary Battle of Agincourt in October 1415, in which French troops greatly

outnumber the British. But Henry's secret weapon is the longbow, the "machine gun of the Middle Ages," which was vital to English victories over French forces in a number of important battles in the Hundred Years War. At Agincourt, some 6,000 French soldiers were killed, to only a few hundred English dead.

In preparation for the battle, the king puts Falstaff (Edgerton), his friend and confidant, in military command: "But I have tasked Sir John to join this campaign for one most vital reason alone: he respects war as only a man who has seen its most monstrous form can. He lusts after it not, but rather regards it with the grim sobriety that you and your men should hope he would."

Edgerton-Falstaff gets most of the best lines: "We will most surely sacrifice souls. Thus is the nature of war. It is bloody and soulless," and "Too often have I seen men of war invent work for themselves, work that leads to nothing but vainglory and slaughtered men. I'm not that man. And this here is the war that you have chosen to wage."

The killing field is strewn with corpses, but Henry has all the French survivors slaughtered (according to his defenders, he was concerned that the French prisoners, outnumbering their captors, would seize weapons and overpower the latter). The defeated French monarch, the mad Charles VI (Thibault de Montalembert)—his son The Dauphin is well played by Robert Pattinson—tells Henry: "This conversation we are about to have has been had many times before, and will be had many times again for centuries to come between men of vanity and men of good reason. I would hope that you and I are men of good reason. We are leaders of lands and peoples, and yet it is family that moves us. Family consumes us." Is that really the case? Do the filmmakers think so?

Charles urges Henry to marry his daughter Catherine (Lily-Rose Depp). Through her, Henry learns that his closest advisor William Gascoigne (Sean Harris) tricked him into invading France based on the lie that there was a terrorist plot against the English throne—this is the film’s most overt and telling reference to present reality. As it turns out, Gascoigne planned to add French territory to his already sizable English estates.

*The King* holds the viewer’s attention. It is intelligently written and filmed, and its mood is embellished by Nicholas Britell’s score. One becomes keenly aware, however, that the film has virtually nothing to do with Shakespeare. Most perplexing of all perhaps is the fact that Michôd and Edgerton have completely excised the humor and dangerous disorderliness from one of the most famous and unsettling characters in English literature—Falstaff, who appears memorably in four of Shakespeare’s plays. Literary critic Harold Bloom termed Falstaff, variously, “the true and perfect image of life itself,” “the representative of imaginative freedom” and “the veritable monarch of language.” But we are deprived of his personality almost entirely.

It seems the film’s creators had decent intentions, both to call attention to Shakespeare’s work and to produce an anti-war film. However, they have not genuinely succeeded on either score.

Stage and film adaptations and “updatings” of Elizabethan and Jacobean works for contemporary purposes were relatively common in the 20th century. German playwright Bertolt Brecht called on Shakespeare’s assistance in his *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929–31) and *Arturo Ui* (1941), and adapted Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1924) and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (1951–53) in their entirety, all with considerable success. Orson Welles directed theater productions of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* in the late 1930s with distinct and forceful political and social themes. The list goes on.

Unhappily, *The King* is neither fish nor fowl, not Shakespeare and not a scathing social drama in its own right either.

As for anti-war and anti-establishment material, the creators might have begun with *Henry IV, Part 2* itself. Shakespeare, who had some grasp of the political process, has his ailing Henry IV explain in Act IV that as an usurper he has spent much of his reign justifying

or defending his position. He suggests that his son, as Henry V, will have a firmer claim to the crown, but anger is still fresh and his former friends, who helped him originally seize power, have only recently been disarmed.

The king goes on to explain that he planned a new Crusade to the Holy Land as a means of distracting the population at home and making them forget about his past misdeeds. “Therefore, my Harry,” he concludes, “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, may waste the memory of the former days.” Diverting the minds of a people with foreign wars has not gone out of style.



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