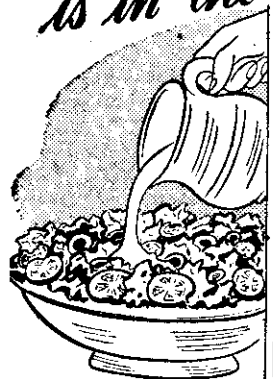


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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

IMPORTANT AS WELL AS GOOD

HENRY V.

(Two Cities)

WELL, here it is—and quite
as good as overseas re-
ports had led me to expect.
But Henry V. is more than
merely good; it is also im-
portant: certainly one of the most im-
portant British films of the past ten
years, and perhaps one of the most
important ever made by any country. It
opens up new vistas of achievement for
the motion-picture, suggesting that much
dramatic material hitherto considered far
outside the cinema's scope should now be
regarded as being within the possibility
of successful presentation to the movies'
world-wide audience. In brief, Henry V.
is one of those miracles that restore
one's faith in the cinema.

At the same time, it is not a miracle
that we should expect to be repeated in
a hurry, for the film must have cost an
English fortune to produce, with its
galaxy of stage stars, its rich colouring
and lavish costuming, its spectacular
Agincourt sequence, and its elaborately
stylised period settings (after the man-
ner of 15th century tapestries). You
will possibly have a new understanding
and appreciation of Shakespeare after
seeing it, for his language comes to life
as well as his characters and situations.
This play is by no means Shakespeare's
best, either in form or content, yet the
blank verse is so beautifully and so
effectively spoken by almost every single
member of the cast that I think those
who have hitherto known Shakespeare
only through the school-room, or per-
haps through the Allan Wilkie company
and repertory performances, will be sur-
prised to discover how easy it is to fol-
low the dialogue and how full of mean-
ing it is.

* * *

THIS is not to suggest that any un-
warranted process of "simplification"
has taken place. Alan Dent, who edited
the text for the screen play, has taken
no liberties which will annoy the Shakes-
pearean purists, except perhaps by in-
troducing one speech from the Second
Part of Henry IV. for the deathbed scene
of Sir John Falstaff (played by George
Robey). But this is an effective and
moving sequence, and I think justifiable
on that ground alone. Apart from this,
there is nothing in Henry V. that Shakes-
peare did not write for it (you may be
surprised to find that he wrote so much
French, and also that he included so
many stage directions in the text),
though this doesn't mean that everything
he did write has been put into the film.

Since the production even now runs
for two hours and 16 minutes, some con-
densation was essential and the cutting
has been so judicious that nothing really
vital has been lost, except perhaps one
aspect of King Henry himself. As pre-
sented with great vigour but rather self-
consciously by Laurence Olivier, here is

Henry in all his royal splendour; a
"lovely bully" of a man, strong in courage
and humanity. Yet as Shakespeare drew
him, still with admiration, Henry could
also be cruel and ruthless, as witness his
speech threatening the town of Harfleur
with frightful consequences if it did not
submit to his army, and his orders to
the English at Agincourt to kill their
prisoners when the French rallied for a
new attack. By cutting these two
speeches, as well as the Scroop con-
spiracy against the king (which admit-
tedly is not otherwise very important),
the editor has thrown the character of
Henry just a little out of focus.

* * *

ORDINARILY I have not much sym-
pathy with those writers who, in de-
scribing stage plays or the film versions
of stage plays, announce with rapture
that "if only the author could see what
has been done to his creation he would
certainly approve, etc." I am pretty sure
that if Shakespeare could see what some
other film producers have done to his
work he would say things about them
which would make the fiercest diatribes
in his plays sound like nursery rhymes
by comparison. But in this case I think
the assumption might be justified and
that Shakespeare would probably approve
heartily of the vast scope, the panoramic
sweep of action, that the unrestricted
camera here gives to his play. For in
Henry V. particularly, Shakespeare con-
stantly bemoaned the limitations of the
contemporary theatre which, for the
Battle of Agincourt, restricted him to
"four or five most vile and ragged foils."
His appeal to the onlooker to use his
imagination—to "eke out our perform-
ance with your mind"—is voiced in every
part of the play through the mouth of
Chorus (enacted in the film by Leslie
Banks): "Grapple your minds to sternage
of this navy"; "Entertain conjecture of
a time"; "Work, work your thoughts";
"Suppose that you have seen . . ." etc.

Well, these are lazy days; we do not
need imaginations of Elizabethan calibre
now that we have the movie camera to
work for us. The camera can, in very
fact, "into a thousand parts divide one
man," so that, in the Agincourt sequence,
we do not have to be content with a
"brawl ridiculous" between those "four
or five most vile and ragged foils," but
we see instead very nearly the most ex-
citing battle the screen has ever pre-
sented (second only, I suggest, to the
battle on the ice in *Alexander Nevsky*).
"Think (cries Chorus), when we talk of
horses, that you see them printing their
proud hoofs in the receiving earth." The
appeal is superfluous, for there, beyond
doubt, are the horses; there are the
French knights astride them, advancing
at the gallop towards the meagre ranks
of English bowmen. And then the sing-
ing flight of the arrows, the clash and

(continued on next page)