Why I Think About King Henry V Everyday

I tried reading Henry IV Part 1 and Part 2 in my first few days living in London. I want to emphasize the word 'tried' because I had such little context to when and why the play was written and to be honest, I found it difficult to stay awake while reading them. Having no connection to or understanding of the frame around the play, I was lost in a complex history that I do not understand, tucked inside a language that is practically foreign to me. All I gathered is that I was following a story about King Henry V coming to power. Then, about two weeks into my English adventure, I saw both of these plays staged at Shakespeare's Globe under the artistic direction of Michele Terry. Again, I found myself thinking more about how much my feet hurt from standing in the pit for two and a half hours than thinking about the rich implications of choosing to stage the Henries in 2019. I wanted so badly to connect with these plays—to feel intellectual and to understand that part of British culture. I didn't. At least, in that moment I didn't. It wasn't until a few weeks after I had read the plays and then having seen them staged at Shakespeare's Globe that a clearer picture started to come together for me, and I finally found that connection I was yearning for. Now, I think about King Henry V almost every day.

I found my connection to the Henries as I immersed myself in British history. In the framework of a course on Shakespeare in London, I was particularly drawn to Tudor Era history while visiting the historic sites. It was in places like the Tower of London and the National Portrait Gallery and Hampton Court that gave me bits and pieces of history that sparked long, late-night Google searches. I just *had* to solidify a timeline of events. I wanted to know everything about the Tudor Era—where it starts and ends, what characterizes it, and how it

influences literature. It was in this personal research and near obsession that I started to realize how important seeing the Henries at Shakespeare's Globe was in influencing me as a person.

Weeks after seeing the Henries and after multiple return visits to my favorite Tudor sites, I started to realize how Shakespeare's writing career was heavily shaped by rampant nationalism in the Tudor years. Nationalism is fueled by fear and uncertainty. Considering that where we live and where we grow up are arguably the most tangible pieces of our personal identities, it only makes sense that we cling to our nationality so adamantly when the future seems uncertain. This was obviously true in Elizabethan England, in the height of Shakespeare's writing career. England was gripped by fear as everyone was wondering who the next monarch would be after Queen Elizabeth died. The Virgin Queen had no heir; they would have to look abroad for her successor. This was a terrifying thought for a country in which being Protestant is an intensifying part of the new English identity. England had just endured the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary—who was not only a Catholic who executed Protestants, she was also half Spanish. Nationalism raged as the fear of a Catholic foreigner on the English throne loomed.

It is fascinating that in that fear and uncertainty, Shakespeare chose to write about his historic Plantagenet monarchs and specifically in the case of the Henries I saw, the legendary English victory at the Battle of Agincourt. Plays about England's mythic triumph in the Hundred Year's War over the French crown—what could be more pleasing to the Globe's patrons? These patrons were English citizens who were grasping on to any piece of their identity they possibly could. Of course, they would want to grasp on to the time that England triumphed over France,

despite being outnumbered five to one in battle. These were the kind of ideals that people in Elizabethan England wanted to cling to in the turmoil of how uncertain their futures were.

But, that's only the first layer of why I think about King Henry V every day. Not only do the Henries have interesting implications for the Tudor period, but even now in a country currently framed by intense Brexit politics. Nationalism is as rampant now as it was in Elizabethan England, but far more controversial, at least in my modern opinion. The United Kingdom is a far more diverse place than it was in back under Queen Elizabeth and British identity has evolved so much since then. The choice for Michele Terry to stage historically nationalistic plays in this time period was a provocative choice and potentially very contentious. But, with her idea of "blind casting," she managed to bring up a very important question with a very simple directing choice: what does it mean to be British? She cast a very diverse group of people—people who historically would not have been considered "British," and perhaps still not considered British by some people.

I love the idea of juxtaposing these two stagings of Henry IV Part 1 and Part 2, separated by over four hundred years of history. There are many similarities of the two time periods, most significantly the political climate. Uncertainty and fear are plaguing the English citizens of the 1590s and of 2019. Nationalism is increasing. While certainly nationalism can be taken in an intensely negative direction, I won't say that I learned that national pride is a bad thing. I think loyalty to country is beautiful and important. What seeing the Henries in the framework of newly discovered Tudor history as well as modern British politics, I learned that identity can and should evolve. What it meant to be English in Elizabethan England is different than what that means today in the UK. It is possible to love your country, be proud of its history, and yet still

allow the meaning of what it means to be “British” to evolve and expand to include everyone who wants to be a part of an incredibly rich and meaningful story.