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# Using Shakespeare's *Henry V* to Teach Just-War Principles<sup>1</sup>

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**The author employs a careful reading of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, supported by insights from scholars Theodor Meron, Peter Saccio and Gary Taylor, to draw out some points for teachers to use in courses on ethics and warfare in general or the just-war tradition in particular. Detailed lesson plans and discussion questions are provided in an Appendix.**

## Introduction

Most of us assume that we have a basic right not to be killed. We might not consider that to be an absolute right—since that would entail strict pacifism—but rather what philosophers call a *prima facie* right.<sup>2</sup> For example, we might be said to *forfeit* our right not to be killed if we commit a particularly heinous crime like aggravated murder. Or we might *waive* that right if we suffer from a terminal illness and can't end our own life without assistance from others. And any right that can be forfeited or waived cannot be absolute. But we're certainly on solid ground in believing that we have to have very serious moral reasons to justify killing people.

In the Western just-war tradition, war is thought to be morally acceptable if it can satisfy certain ethical and procedural criteria. But that tradition also regards war as potentially causing so much suffering, death and destruction that leaders must carefully weigh those harms against the goals they hope to achieve through war. Even if one's country has been seriously harmed, one's soldiers or other citizens unjustly killed by foreign powers or terrorists, leaders still face significant moral constraints under just-war criteria on what they may do in response. Having just cause to go to war, for example, does not permit one to wage total war.

William Shakespeare's play about King Henry V of England,<sup>3</sup> loosely based on historical events in the early 1400's, provides a rich source of ethical issues in warfare and military leadership. In what follows, I'll explain how I've found Shakespeare's play helpful in my own university courses in illustrating specific just-war concerns, and indicate specific ways in which teachers might use the play to nurture significant moral reflection and discussion by their students.

### ***Jus ad Bellum: Just Cause, Right Intention, Proportionality, and Legitimate Authority***

Henry V was not only heir to the English throne, but was also descended from a French king, and had other claims to parts of France through other ancestors as well as some recent treaties.<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of Shakespeare's play, Henry is deliberating with his close advisors about whether his claim on the French throne is strong enough to justify his going to war against the French if they refuse to recognize him as their true king. Henry asks the Archbishop of Canterbury for an assessment of his claim, and warns him to be scrupulously honest:

God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,  
That you should fashion ... or bow your reading....  
For God doth know how many now in health  
Shall drop their blood in approbation  
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.  
Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,  
How you awake our sleeping sword of war....  
For never two such kingdoms did contend  
Without much fall of blood, whose guiltless drops  
Are every one a woe, a sore complaint  
'Gainst him whose wrongs gives edge unto the swords  
That makes such waste in brief mortality. (1.2, i.e., act 1, scene 2)

In this moving passage, Henry indicates that he is keenly aware of the high cost of war in innocent human lives, and therefore the moral importance of sincere and careful appraisal of the reasons offered in support of war.<sup>5</sup> And later he expresses great affection and admiration for his

troops, e.g., at the battles of Harfleur (3.1) and Agincourt (4.3) where he praises the courage even of the lower-class yeomen and calls them his brothers: “We few, we happy few....”

In teaching the play, I’ve found it intriguing to compare Henry’s deliberations with the advice of Francisco de Vitoria, who lived after the real Henry but before Shakespeare. Legal historian Theodor Meron doubts that Shakespeare knew the work of Vitoria or other just-war theorists like Suarez or Gentili, though the latter were his contemporaries, and Gentili even taught at Oxford. But Meron infers from the play that Shakespeare was quite familiar with existing laws of war as well as the customary ways in which royals deliberated about war.<sup>6</sup>

According to Vitoria, when a head of state is trying to determine whether there is just cause to go to war, “One must consult reliable and wise men who can speak with freedom and without anger or hate or greed.... [I]f he is in doubt about his rightful title [to a particular region, e.g.] he must carefully examine the case and listen peacefully to the reasons of the other side, to see if a clear decision can be reached in favor of himself or the other party.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Shakespeare’s Henry V has surrounded himself with advisors who are all biased in favor of war. And the Archbishop whom Henry trusts to provide an objective opinion has a hidden agenda, to fund Henry’s war in France in the hope of quashing a parliamentary bill that would have taken enormous tracts of church land (1.1).

The Archbishop effectively refutes the French argument against Henry’s claim via his female ancestor (1.2). But he ignores the fact that there have been nearly 100 years of rule by another family line in France, making French nobles and commoners unlikely to want to shift their allegiance abruptly to Henry.

Furthermore, was it realistic to believe that people speaking different languages and separated by the Channel could become a unified nation under Henry V? I think that

Shakespeare implies otherwise in his striking insertion of a comic scene in 3.5 with its dialogue almost entirely in the French language. The conversation there also focuses on words for body parts, which Shakespeare may have meant to hint that Katherine, the French king's daughter, would be treated as a form of property, part of the spoils of Henry's military victories. And there's an analogy drawn in 5.2 between virgins and fortified towns ("girdled with maiden walls"). Shakespeare may have intended these elements of the play to remind his audience that the French were conquered against their will: that Henry's invasion was akin to the rape of a virgin. Then again, it's tempting but quite possibly anachronistic to imagine Shakespeare as a feminist ahead of his time: Shakespeare and his audience may have assumed that Henry was merely taking what was his by right anyway, whether it was French land or the daughter of the French king.

Returning to Henry's initial deliberations about whether to war against France, his other advisors suggest that European monarchs will expect him to enforce his claims, like his ancestors did. And they appeal to his warlike courage and youthful desire to expand his power. None of them urges caution or careful consideration of French counter-claims. All of this has the effect of persuading Henry to go to war: "France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe or break it all to pieces" (1.2).<sup>8</sup>

He then receives a message from the French dauphin (the crown prince), who repudiates Henry's demands and offers in their place a "treasure" of tennis balls, an insulting reference to Henry's former reputation as a rowdy, irresponsible playboy. Even though it's not clear that this message was sent with the knowledge or permission of the French king, Henry is deeply insulted by it, and says to the French ambassador:

Tell the pleasant Prince this mock of his  
Hath turned his balls to gunstones, and his soul

Shall stand sore charged for the wasteful vengeance  
That shall fly from them—for many a thousand widows  
Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands,  
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down.... (1.2)

Here Henry seems to have allowed a personal insult to cloud his objective moral assessment of *jus ad bellum*. His anger and his obsession with winning the French crown overwhelm the more humane disposition he exhibited at the beginning of the play. In just-war terms, he's not clearly satisfied the criteria of just cause, right intention or proportionality. He's hurtling headlong into war.<sup>9</sup> (According to Saccio, the tennis-ball incident never actually occurred.<sup>10</sup> But no matter, as it reminds us how personal animosities between national leaders can sometimes drive or exacerbate momentous international crises.)

Just before Henry leads his army against the French, an assassination attempt sponsored by them is uncovered (2.2). The real Henry V did indeed quash an assassination plot, but the conspirators didn't need French money to have a motive for deposing him: they sought to replace him with someone whom they believed had a stronger claim to it than Henry, due to his father's usurpation of the crown from Richard II. In other words, the assassination was rooted in a controversy concerning Henry's legitimate authority, not foreign intervention.<sup>11</sup> The only hint of this in the play occurs on the eve of the battle of Agincourt, when Henry prays that God will be with his troops and not hold his father's sin against him (4.1).

Curiously, Shakespeare doesn't portray Henry as holding a grudge against the French for trying to assassinate him, even though that would have dramatically strengthened his rationale for war. In other words, having invented a French role in the conspiracy to murder him, Shakespeare subsequently forgets all about it! In Act V, Henry treats the French king—the sponsor of his would-be assassins—with surprising cordiality.

After Henry lands in France with his army, his relative Exeter delivers an ultimatum directly to the French king, similar in its ominous tone to Henry's earlier retort to the dauphin:

[King Henry bids you to] deliver up the crown, and to take mercy  
On the poor souls for whom this hungry war  
Opens his vasty jaws; and on your head  
[Are laid] the widows' tears, the orphans' cries,  
The dead men's blood, the pining maidens' groans,  
For husbands, fathers, and betrothed lovers  
That shall be swallowed in this controversy. (2.4)

Notice that like Henry's retort to the dauphin's insult, and in contrast to his initial warning to his Archbishop, with Exeter's ultimatum Henry has completely shed any sense of personal responsibility for the destruction that the war will cause. *All of its carnage will be the fault of the French.* Now there's obviously an important sense in which those who cause an unnecessary war are primarily responsible for the deaths that result. But it doesn't follow that the other side is not also accountable for at least some of those deaths.

One additional topic relevant to Henry's authority to wage war and the justice of his cause concerns the conditions under which citizens must obey the order of their government to fight. This issue is wonderfully explored by Shakespeare in a conversation on the eve of the battle of Agincourt between Henry (in disguise) and some of his men (4.1):

*Henry:* "Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the King's company, his cause being just and his quarrel honorable."

*Williams:* "That's more than we know."

*Bates:* "Ay, or more than we should seek after. For we know enough if we know we are the King's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us."

*Williams:* "But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, 'We died at such a place'—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle, for how can they charitably dispose of anything, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it—who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection."

Bates later pledges to fight “lustily” for Henry, but here he argues that because soldiers must obey their king, they can’t be blamed if the king’s reasons for going to war are unjust. Williams adds, though, that if the king’s cause is truly unjust, he’ll have a lot to answer for in terms of the unnecessary deaths of his soldiers and the effects on their wives and children. He also seems to imply that the Christian souls of soldiers are endangered in battle, perhaps because they can’t maintain dispositions of Christian love and repentance while they’re killing, and thus may die in a sinful state. So even if soldiers are innocent in some sense, the king in effect forces them to incur moral taint.<sup>12</sup>

These are important concerns that almost any soldier in combat might express, emphasized by Shakespeare with vivid and emotionally charged images. Unfortunately, the King’s subsequent reply completely evades the issue of his responsibility in forcing his soldiers to kill and endanger their own lives and souls for a possibly unjust cause. Military leaders owe their troops much more careful consideration before placing them in harm’s way.

Theodor Meron mentions an intriguing fact about Henry that apparently Shakespeare didn’t know. After conquering Harfleur, Henry challenged the French dauphin to a *duel*, the result of which would determine which of them would rule France. Henry ostensibly sought to prevent further destruction, suffering, and losses of life that the war would continue to produce, which in itself would be attractive under *jus ad bellum* principles of proportionality and last resort. But the dauphin apparently never responded to the challenge, either because he feared losing his life to an older and stronger warrior, or because he would not wager the throne of France on such an unpredictable scenario, or perhaps because it would imply that the issue of just cause in that war was of no real consequence.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Jus in Bello: Noncombatant Immunity and Proportionality***

Under modern just-war criteria, soldiers are subject to being killed in combat until they surrender or are incapacitated by their wounds. The point is that combatants may justly be harmed only so long as they pose a credible threat to others. Most civilians pose no such threat, and thus may not be intentionally killed except in rare circumstances (e.g., if they work in munitions factories). Moreover, if civilians are determined to be at risk in legitimate military attacks, then officials must carefully consider whether the target needs to be hit at all. If so, it should involve the least destructive force necessary to do the job, to minimize “collateral damage.” Those moral ideas are often encapsulated as rules of noncombatant immunity and proportionality, and have been incorporated into international treaties such as the Hague and Geneva conventions. Even if our enemies do not hold themselves to those high standards, we cannot shirk our own responsibility to do so.

Of course, King Henry V lived well before the formulation in just-war theory or international law of a comprehensive principle of noncombatant immunity, not to mention technologies like satellite surveillance and smart weapons that help us to uphold such a principle. Many battles in Henry V’s era involved sieges of fortified towns, which often led to horrific losses of both soldiers and civilians from indiscriminate weapons. Captured towns were also frequently subject to total annihilation.<sup>14</sup>

But even in Henry’s day, it was understood that direct attacks on civilians violated Christian prohibitions on killing the innocent, as well as a secular code of chivalry among knights that ruled out intentional harms to defenseless people as unprofessional.<sup>15</sup> With that in mind, consider the frightening ultimatum<sup>16</sup> that Henry delivers to the fortified city of Harfleur, the first town that he attacks after landing in France.

How yet resolves the Governor of the town?



This is the latest parole we will admit [i.e. the last cease-fire we'll allow].  
 Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves,  
 Or like to men proud of destruction  
 Defy us to do our worst. For as I am a soldier...  
 If I begin the batt'ry once again  
 I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur  
 Till in her ashes she lie buried.  
 The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
 And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
 In liberty of bloody hand shall range  
 With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass  
 Your fresh fair virgins and your flow'ring infants....  
 What is't to me, when you yourselves are cause,  
 If your pure maidens fall into the hand  
 Of hot and forcing violation?  
 What rein can hold licentious wickedness  
 When down the hill he holds his fierce career...?  
 Therefore, you men of Harfleur,  
 Take pity of your town and of your people  
 Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,  
 Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace  
 O'erblows the filthy and contagious clouds  
 Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy.  
 If not—why, in a moment look to 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,  
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused  
 Do break the clouds....  
 What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid?  
 Or, guilty in defense, be thus destroyed? (3.4)

In sum, if Harfleur won't surrender, the English will do their worst and have no mercy. His soldiers will rape women and slaughter infants and the elderly. Henry won't be able to stop them, and doesn't much care to. In the end he'll burn the city to the ground, and their destruction will be their own fault.

In the face of this ultimatum, Harfleur duly surrenders, and Henry then tells Exeter to “use mercy to them all.” So was his ultimatum just a bluff? Possibly, since elsewhere (3.7) he

set strict rules ordering his soldiers not to molest or plunder civilians, and punished soldiers who broke those rules. In other words, he cared more about military ethics—and was better able to control his troops—than he let on in his ultimatum. On the other hand, his angry speech at Harfleur was consistent with his earlier threats against the French dauphin and king that innocent people would die if his rule in France were not accepted.<sup>17</sup> Meron notes an actual precedent for this in the year 1370 when the English massacred 3,000 unarmed French residents of Limoges after the town surrendered. Henry himself after capturing Caen spared only its women, children and priests; all other adult males were massacred. And in spite of his order in the play to “use mercy” against Harfleur, the real Henry expelled most poor people from the town.<sup>18</sup>

But even if Shakespeare intended us to infer that Henry was bluffing at Harfleur in threatening atrocities, his ultimatum clearly went well beyond predicting “collateral damage” from his siege tactics. We might well question whether it was ethical for him to threaten something that would be immoral to do, even if the threat was intended to achieve a legitimate military goal. (Compare our possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against their use against us by other countries.)

During the battle of Agincourt, there is another powerful scene where marauding French soldiers are reported to have killed a group of English boys who had been assigned to guard the supplies (4.7). One of the English soldiers, outraged at the slaughter of those defenseless boys, cries that it’s “expressly against the law of arms” and “an errant piece of knavery.” But no one (including Henry) evinces any regret or remorse at having brought the boys along on the campaign and thus placing their lives at risk.

Shakespeare’s play also provokes ethical reflection on the proper treatment of prisoners of war. In the midst of the battle of Agincourt (4.6), Henry’s army was well on its way to

defeating a much larger French army. But he didn't yet know that, and fearing at one point that French forces were regrouping for a counterattack, he ordered his men to kill their prisoners. In the play that line usually goes by so quickly that readers or viewers might completely miss its import. But Gary Taylor in his scholarly edition of the play claims that Shakespeare's original text gave an explicit stage direction, "The soldiers kill their prisoners," which when performed by the actors would have a much more powerful effect on audiences than simply hearing Henry's order by itself.<sup>19</sup> (Unfortunately, Kenneth Branagh and Lawrence Olivier completely excised that scene from their films of the play, perhaps because it would undermine their otherwise consistent portrayal of Henry as a noble hero.)

Today the international law of war explicitly prohibits the killing of prisoners:

It is especially forbidden to kill or wound an enemy who, having laid down his arms, or having no longer means of defense, has surrendered at discretion.... A commander may not put his prisoners to death because their presence retards his movements or diminishes his power of resistance by necessitating a large guard, or by reason of their consuming supplies, or because it appears certain that they will regain their liberty through the impending success of their forces. It is likewise unlawful for a commander to kill his prisoners on grounds of self-preservation, even in the case of airborne or commando operations, although the circumstances of the operation may make necessary rigorous supervision of and restraint upon the movement of prisoners of war.<sup>20</sup>

But we might imagine ourselves in a situation similar to that of Henry V, commanding soldiers in the face of a much larger force. In spite of the strict legal regulations just cited, would it really be unethical to order that no quarter be given or that prisoners be killed, if we thought that our own soldiers were at risk of annihilation and we couldn't spare any of them to guard prisoners?<sup>21</sup> Granted that killing surrendered and disarmed soldiers is a horrific thing, bordering on murder, is it really fair to prohibit their captors from doing so in the heat of battle, if they have reason to fear that they themselves will otherwise be killed? These are questions that I pose to my students in wrestling with the implications of the play.

## Appendix: Lesson Plans

I typically reserve three one-hour class sessions for *Henry V* during a 10-week undergraduate Ethics and Warfare course. A similar approach might be used in a high school Advanced Placement course:

*Session 1:* I recommend to my students as background reading pages v-xli, 147-149 and 153-154 of Roma Gill's edition of the play, which contains useful information on the real Henry V's family tree (important regarding just cause and legitimate authority), and brief introductions to each scene. In class, I show brief excerpts from two film versions of the play: Henry's initial deliberations in 1.2, his ultimatum to Harfleur in 4.1, and his pep-talk to his soldiers prior to the battle of Agincourt, all from Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film; and Henry's conversations with his soldiers on the eve of that battle, from a 1980 film version of the play by the BBC.

*Session 2:* Discuss the play's Prologue and most of Acts 1-3. (The following sections are recommended but not required: 2.1, 2.3, 3.3, 3.5, 3.8.)

*Session 3:* Discuss Act 4. (4.8 and Act 5 are recommended but not required.)

At the end of session one, I provide my students with the following questions to guide their reading of the play and our discussions of it during sessions 2 and 3:

1) King Henry V came to believe that he had just cause to go to war against France.

What reasons he would give in support of that belief?

2) Francisco de Vitoria wrote that when a head of state is deliberating as to whether there is just cause to go to war, "One must consult reliable and wise men who can speak with freedom and without anger or hate or greed." Also, "if he is in doubt about his rightful title [to a particular region, e.g.] he must carefully examine the case and listen peacefully to the reasons of

the other side, to see if a clear decision can be reached in favor of himself or the other party.” By those standards, how would you judge King Henry’s deliberations?

3) Consider the following matters of “proportionality”:

a) Were his objectives and motives weighty enough to justify war?

b) Before deciding to go to war against France, did Henry adequately recognize and accept responsibility for the death and suffering that would probably result?

c) Did he wage war only as a last resort?

4) In 4.1, what do soldiers Bates and Williams have to say about obedience to the king, and the implications if the king’s reasons for going to war are unjust?

5) Is Henry’s response to their concerns adequate?

6) In 3.4, examine Henry’s chilling ultimatum to Harfleur:

a) Do you think that Henry would have been unable, as he claimed, to stop his men from committing the atrocities he warned about?

b) Was it fair for him to blame the leaders of Harfleur for those atrocities if they refused to surrender?

c) How would you interpret his ultimatum in light of his subsequent order to Exeter to “use mercy to them all”? Was the ultimatum merely a bluff? If so, do you think it was ethical for him to use that to try to end the siege?

7) Consider Henry’s orders and threats to kill captured French soldiers in 4.6-4.7. Under the circumstances, do you think that they were justified?

8) If you were in command of an army that was greatly outnumbered and about to be overrun, would it be ethical for you to order your soldiers to give no quarter (i.e., to kill every enemy soldier whom they disable or capture)?

9) In 4.7, Llewellyn condemns the French slaughter of the boys who had been guarding the English supplies as “expressly against the law of arms” and an “arrant piece of knavery.”

But do you think that the English also bear some responsibility for bringing boys that close to a battle?

10) What do you think we can learn from *Henry V* about ethical issues in modern war? For example: In what ways are contemporary political/military leaders similar to and different from the character of Henry? In what respects might people today be tempted to make some of the same moral mistakes that Henry made, either in their decisions to go to war, or in the strategies, tactics and weapons that they use in war?

## **Biography**

David L. Perry is Professor of Ethics at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He teaches courses on ethics and warfare, strategic leadership, and U.S. defense policies, planning, organizations and processes. He also edits and writes materials for a web-based educational module on Just-War Theory, and is an author of core-course lessons on ethical reasoning, the military profession, military ethics, and critical thinking. He earned a Ph.D. in ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His numerous publications include articles on ethics and war in comparative religious perspective, and diverse ethical issues in espionage, covert action, medicine, and business. *None of the views expressed in his article should be construed necessarily to reflect the official position or policy of the U.S. Army or any other federal government entity.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Previous versions of this essay were presented at the National Character and Leadership Symposium, U.S. Air Force Academy, 21 February 2002, and the International Studies Association, Portland, OR, 28 February 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ross (1930; 2003) argued that there is a cluster of *prima facie* moral duties, none of which is absolute, but all of which are binding on rational persons across cultures. Childress (1980) applied Ross's theory to the just-war tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare (2001) is an inexpensive version suitable for classroom use. But Shakespeare (1998) is indispensable for professors, due to the depth of editor Gary Taylor's scholarly annotations.

<sup>4</sup> Saccio (2000: 75-79); Meron (1993: ch. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Mattox (2000: 32-34).

<sup>6</sup> Meron (1993: 10-11).

<sup>7</sup> Vitoria (1991: 307, 310).

<sup>8</sup> Mattox (2000: 35-36) unfortunately ignores that ominous line in assessing whether Henry satisfies the criterion of right intention.

<sup>9</sup> On this point I differ from Mattox (2000: 34-35).

<sup>10</sup> Saccio (2000: 80).

<sup>11</sup> Saccio (2000: 72-75).

<sup>12</sup> On the need for medieval Christian soldiers to perform penance for killing enemy soldiers, even in a just war, see Verkamp (1993: chs. 1-2).

<sup>13</sup> Meron (1993: ch. 7).

<sup>14</sup> Meron (1993: ch. 6).

<sup>15</sup> Meron (1993: 91-93).

<sup>16</sup> An abridged version of this speech was delivered with chilling effect by the actor Kenneth Branagh in his 1989 film of the play.

<sup>17</sup> I don't believe that a close reading of the play supports Mattox's claim (2000: 49) that Shakespeare sought to portray Henry V as a consistently just warrior.

<sup>18</sup> Meron (1993: ch. 6).

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare (1998: 243).

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Army (1976: 2.29 and 3.85).

<sup>21</sup> Keegan (1978: 108-112) connects that specific rationale with the killing of French prisoners at the actual battle of Agincourt.

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