Just war and class conflict in Shakespeare’s ‘Henry V’

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers’ – King Henry’s speech to rouse his troops before the Battle of Agincourt is one of the most famous in Shakespeare. But what does ‘Henry V’ tell us about theories of war in Elizabethan England? Professor Anne-Marie Walkowicz of Ohio’s Central State University in the USA argues that the play explores the just war tradition – the counsel rulers should seek before engaging in military action – and class conflict.

God allowed rulers to go to war if they had good cause, and that soldiers who killed in battle were not acting sinfully if rulers forced them to fight. Medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas elaborated the rules. Two important concepts were that rulers should seek counsel before taking military action, and that action should be in proportion to the economic and human losses that would arise. The aim was to protect the state from tyranny and ensure that rulers acted for the common good, and not for personal glory.

By the 15th and 16th centuries, humanist theologians such as Erasmus of Rotterdam had begun to question the just war tradition, and stressed that rulers were responsible for protecting their people’s physical and economic wellbeing. Along with numerous manuals on warfare, pamphlets proposing pacifist views were circulating widely at the time Shakespeare wrote his play – a time when England was again threatened by war at home and abroad.

BLOOD AND WAR
In Shakespeare’s play, King Henry’s bishops advise the king and his nobles that his royal lineage entitles him to the French throne. Military action to claim that right is therefore just. However, as the opening scene makes clear, the bishops’ advice amounts to political manoeuvring. They promote war to divert attention from parliamentary proposals to take away their church lands. It is King Henry, not the bishops, who shows concern for the loss of life and blood that war entails – blood that he describes as ‘guiltless drops’ and ‘every one a woe’. Walkowicz argues that Shakespeare’s extensive use of blood imagery helps to define the play’s moral argument and exploration of class conflict. For example, while the bishops extol the king’s aristocratic heritage and ‘bloodlines’, King Henry is concerned about his responsibility for the ‘bloodshed’ of those lost in battle.

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Behind the Research
Professor Anne-Marie E Walkowicz

BAND OF BROTHERS
Just as King Henry used the bishops’ and nobles’ counsel to manage public policy to gain political support for war at the beginning of the play, he uses plebian counsel to inform his St Crispin’s Day speech and spur his troops on to battle. As Walkowicz argues, the first half of the speech addresses political considerations, saying that the war is motivated by honour rather than personal vanity or covetousness. In the second half, the king argues that he is ‘but a man’ and seeks to persuade his soldiers that they fight together as a ‘band of brothers’ and that whoever ‘sheds his blood’ will be his brother, regardless of his birth.

It is one of the most famous battle speeches of all time, including the lines that St Crispin’s Day ‘shall ne’er go by’ From this day to the ending of the world! But we in it shall be remembered. ‘The irony is that, when the king urges his troops to imagine the glory that follows victory and their pride at having secured it, the only names he mentions are those of the nobles, Bedford, Exeter, Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester. Despite his previous appeal to his ‘band of brothers’, it seems that the king has already forgotten the common soldier in favour of an inner circle of nobles linked by bloodlines, wealth, and reputation.

SHAKESPEARE AND CLASS
King Henry wins the Battle of Agincourt, but the play’s epilogue leaves no doubt that Shakespeare wants his audience to question the just cause of war and the cost of human life in the name of national glory. The Chorus tells us that King Henry’s victory was hollow and that in the years that followed, his son Henry VI ‘lost France and made England blest’. The imagery of blood again directs our attention to the impact of war and the socio-political realities of class.

Walkowicz concludes, ‘Henry V’ produces a sustained account of the interconnected issues of monarchical rule, just war, counsel, and class that bring out the disparity of what defined the best interests of the commonwealth and the limitations of political leaders to act in service to the people’s welfare.’

So powerful has the drama come to be regarded, Laurence Olivier’s film version was used to boost British morale in World War II.

Research Objectives
Professor Walkowicz examines William Shakespeare’s ‘Henry V’ for its interconnections with concepts of the just war tradition and political counsel.

Bio
Anne-Marie E Walkowicz is Full Professor and Chair of the Department of Humanities at Central State University in Wilberforce, OH. Her research focuses on Shakespeare’s representation of the practice of counsel as a means of political power. She also studies the role of the liberal arts in workforce preparation.

Funding
Central State University

References

Personal Response
What inspired you to conduct this research?
I am interested in the relation between class and the development of public policy. As a social justice issue, class matters because it helps us to understand social stratification, marginalisation, and inequality.

Your research shows how Shakespeare’s treatment of King Henry’s victory at the Battle of Agincourt makes us question whether this was a ‘just war’. Given that doubt, why do you think the play has so often been used by later rulers and generals, from Horatio Nelson to Winston Churchill, to win support for later conflicts?
Shakespeare’s genius lies in his ability to dramatise nuances, and there is no doubt that ‘Henry V’ shows us both the national glory of war and the cost of winning it. Our modern global world is fraught with ongoing armed conflict, and these critical challenges affect public policy. ‘Henry V’ can be a rich ground to win support for military engagement when the political realities warrant involvement or when the national security is at risk.

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JUST WAR AND CLASS
On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, the disguised King Henry talks to his soldiers in their camp. Seeking backing for the king’s cause, he receives another kind of counsel that rulers would not normally hear – the counsel of the common man and those who fight the king’s war.

The soldiers say they know that if the cause is wrong, God will absorb them of their sins, as they obeyed their ruler. However, God will not absolve the king. They also describe the impact that war has on the general populace and argue that it goes against Christian charity. Again using the imagery of blood, they say that war amounts to soldiers giving their ‘blood’ to preserve the ‘bloodlines’ of noble families rather than the common good.

King Henry diverts the debate away from moral issues of just cause and human loss to discuss the conduct of those involved in the prosecution of war. He describes the rapine, pillage and profiteering associated with war, arguing that such actions must be accounted for by the perpetrators, not the rulers who declare war. In his view, ‘Every subject’s duty is the king’s, but every subject’s soul is his own.’

Walkowicz argues that the king’s encounter with the soldiers provides a more intelligent critique of war than that provided by his bishops and nobles – one that helps him to better understand his responsibilities towards his subjects. Before the battle, the king prays that his soldiers will believe in the cause and have faith that God will not judge them for their actions. However, Henry also acknowledges his private fear that the war may not be just after all – as his father seized the throne from his uncle, he may not be the rightful king.

As Walkowicz explains, counselling is ‘a persuasive art where both sides balance political and personal affairs’. While the king recognises the cost of war, his nobles appeal to his aristocratic ideals of military honour and family duty, urging him to raise his ‘bloody flag’ to become a warrior-king. The imagery juxtaposes the blood of the fallen with the flag of imperial conquest, and ethical concerns about due proportion and the cost of human life are subsumed into the call for military action to reclaim previously held English lands in France. The practice of counsel therefore leads the king to legitimise his claims to France, and he chooses a war of expansion for political issues of succession.