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Shakespeare

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Worlds in Warfare: Crisis and Social Breakdown

Peppering the pages of Shakespeare's plays are his not-so-hidden thoughts of empires in crisis. In *The History of Troilus and Cressida* and *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, Shakespeare opens wide the doors of thought to allow his readers to find themselves in the midst of deception, horror, and social breakdown. Shakespeare acknowledges the triumphs and tragedies of war always have their subsequent consequences, affecting people in multiple ways. Patterns in war can be seen throughout these two plays: selfish reasons to launch the war, the suffering of commoners and destruction of property, breakdown within the camp, personality change, deceitful war tactics, and the treatment of women as commodities. Through these patterns, many of the correlations between warfare and social breakdown can be extensively examined.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, selfishly causing the war is the dispute over Helen, the wife of the Greek soldier Menelaus. Helen falls in love with Paris and deserts her Greek husband Menelaus for Paris, a son of the king in Troy. Regarding the reason of the war, Shakespeare writes, "The ravish'd Helen, Menelaus' queen,/ With wanton Paris sleeps—and that's the quarrel" (Prologue 9-10). The central quarrel of the war is over the possession of the woman Helen. While the Greek army is camped outside of Troy, the Trojan princes along with the king debate whether or not the war is worth the costly defenses to keep her. Troilus, in defense of Paris' action, says to Hector, "Weigh you the worth and honor of a king/ So great as our dread father's in a scale/ Of common ounces?" (2.2.26-28). Hector says, "Brother, she is not worth

what she doth cost/ The keeping... 'Tis mad idolatry / To make the service greater than the god" (2.2.51-52, 56-57). By the end of the discussion, it is decided that even though it is more moral to return Helen to the Greeks, to return Helen would be a disgrace to their own people. Hector says,

If Helen then be wife to Sparta's king,
As it is known she is, these moral laws
Of nature and of nations speak aloud
To have her back return'd. Thus to persist
In doing wrong extenuates not wrong,
But makes it much more heavy. Hector's opinion
Is this in way of truth; yet ne'er the less,
My spritely brethren, I propend to you
In resolution to keep Helen still,
For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependence
Upon our joint and several dignities. (2.2.183-193)

Hector is saying the "moral laws of nature" are in place to keep order among nations. It would be wisest to send back Helen, who is originally the wife of another man. Yet it would be best for their own honor and dignity to keep Helen with them. This selfish action thus maintains a war between Troy and Greece, resulting in the deaths of many warriors—including Hector himself.

Professional soldiers were not the only people affected by the war. Commoners are often enlisted to fight, no doubt many of whom were slain in their battles. Diomedes, a Greek commander, remarks, "She's bitter to her country. Hear me, Paris:/ For every false drop in her bawdy veins,/ A Grecian's life hath sunk; for every scruple/ Of her contaminated carrion weight,/ A Trojan hath been slain. Since she could speak,/ She hath not given so many good words breath/ As for her Greeks and Troyans suff' red death" (4.1.69-75). Both sides have paid a terrible price over this one woman—the fighting is not worth the prize for either side. As a result, death touches the lives of commoners from both countries. Not only this, having the Greek army camped immediately outside the city threatens the lives and freedom of the citizens

inside the walls of Troy. The Trojan people could be overrun at any moment if Greece claims victory. The common people live in danger throughout this war.

Breakdown in the camp is also found due to the ongoing war, both inside the walls of Troy and on the plains where the Greek army is camped. For the Greeks, both arguments and disrespect are spreading throughout the camp. Ajax and Thersites are both men from the Greek camp. One quarrel results because Ajax, a Greek commander, wants Thersites, a member of the army, to find out what the proclamation from the Trojan camp was. Achilles, asking what the quarrel is, overhears Ajax's reply, "I bade the vile owl go learn me the tenor of the proclamation, and he rails upon me" (2.1.90-91). In truth, Thersites is fighting due to a Greek conscription (2.1.97). On the other hand, the high ranks degrade those who serve under them. The commanding leaders fail to respect their war hero, Ajax, who is about to willingly put his life on the line for the camp. The conversation proceeds:

Ajax: And he be proud with me, I'll please his pride.

Let me go to him.

Ulysses: Not for the worth that hangs upon our quarrel.

Ajax: A paltry, insolent fellow!

Nestor: [Aside] How he describes himself!

Ajax: Can he not be sociable?

Ulysses: [Aside] The raven chides blackness.

Ajax: I'll [let] his [humors] blood.

Agamemnon: [Aside] He will be the physician that should be the patient.

(2.3.204-214)

Ajax, though being prideful, is about to fight a great warrior for Greece. Instead of encouraging him and cautioning his pride, the leaders stand aside and mock Ajax behind his back.

In the Trojan palace the breakdown occurs in a different manner—instead of listening to the wise advice of the women in their lives, the leaders ignore and dismiss them. First Priam and his sons ignore Cassandra, a daughter of Priam. Cassandra raves, "Cry, Trojans, cry! practice your eyes with tears!/ Troy must not be, nor goodly Ilion stand./ Our fire-brand brother Paris

burns us all./ Cry, Troyans, cry! a Helen and a woe!/ Cry, cry! Troy burns, or else let Helen go” (2.2.108-112). Just as a prophetess, she exactly predicts the fall of the city of Troy, part of her prophecy including Hecuba’s dream. Hecuba, Paris’s mother, predicted during her pregnancy with him “that she would be delivered of a fire-brand which would be the destruction of Troy” (Evans 496). Paris’ mother had predicted she would die before the destruction of Troy, which was sure to come. Cassandra’s prophesy points out that Paris is the one that will fulfill this downfall.

Not only do the men ignore Cassandra over the ensuing danger, but Hector himself also ignores both his wife Andromache and Cassandra on another occasion. Andromache dreams of Hector’s death and seeks to warn him. She says, speaking to Cassandra, “Consort with me in loud and dear petition,/ Pursue we him on knees; for I have dreamt/ Of bloody turbulence, and this whole night/ Hath been nothing but shapes and forms of slaughter” (5.3.9-12). Though both women plead with Hector not to go, his pride is too great. Hector replies to them, “Hold you still, I say;/ Mine honor keeps the weather of my fate./ Life every man holds dear, but the dear man/ Holds honor far more precious-dear than life” (5.3.25-28). Whether or not Hector believes either one of the women, the valuing of his honor is more important to him than his own life.

Throughout the course of war, personalities also have a tendency to change. For Troilus and Cressida, though they appear to have a strong love for each other, Troilus disowns her at the first sign of the unfaithfulness he sees. While standing outside Diomedes’ tent, Troilus overhears his beloved Cressida talking to Diomedes. After Diomedes forces her to choose between either being his sexual partner or the camp prostitute, she says out loud to herself, “Troilus, farewell! one eye yet looks on thee,/ But with my heart the other eye doth see./ Ah, poor our sex! this fault in us I find,/ The error of our eye directs our mind./ What error leads must err; O then conclude,/

Minds sway'd by eyes are full of turpitude" (5.2.107-112). Seeing no escape from her crisis, Cressida chooses what she believes would be the lesser of the two evils. Though she still loves Troilus, her present circumstances force her to choose Diomedes' proposition. Instead of coming to her rescue, Troilus decides that Cressida is untrue. He cries, "O Cressid! O false Cressid! false, false, false!/ Let untruths stand by thy stained name,/ And they'll seem glorious" (5.2.177-179). Not only does Troilus declare her to be unfaithful, he also asserts that she is lower than all other falsehoods.

Another relationship existing between the two camps is that of Achilles and Polyxena. At an early point in the war, Achilles, a warrior of the Greek camp, had decided not to fight against the Trojans because of his love for Polyxena, a Trojan. This refusal is both a sign of breakdown in the Greek camp and a change in personality. Ulysses says,

There is a mystery (with whom relation
Durst never meddle) in the soul of state,
Which hath an operation more divine
Than breath or pen can give expressure to.
All the commerce that you have had with Troy
As perfectly is ours as yours, my lord,
And better would it fit Achilles much
To throw down Hector than Polyxena. (3.3.201-208)

Achilles would rather give up fighting Hector than to upset Polyxena. He himself confesses, "Here is a letter from Queen Hecuba,/ A token from her daughter, my fair love,/ Both taxing me and gaging me to keep/ An oath that I have sworn. I will not break it./ Fall Greeks, fail fame, honor or go or stay,/ My major vow lies here; this I'll obey" (5.1.39-44). It is only when Achilles learns that Patroclus has been killed that Achilles resolves to fight, and fights with great anger. Ulysses says of him, "Great Achilles/ Is arming, weeping, cursing, vowing vengeance./ Patroclus' wounds have rous'd his drowsy blood" (5.5.30-32). By altering his decision and

killing his enemies, Achilles' peaceful stance on the war changes to great wrath because of the death of his friend Patroclus. His devotion to Polyxena no longer matters to him.

In his anger, Achilles loses sight of right and wrong, resorting to deceitful war tactics. Each side had agreed for one man from each camp to fight to the death, the winner deciding the fate of the war. Achilles violates the agreement, killing his opponent Hector outside the arranged fight. When Achilles reveals his plan to Hector, Hector replies, "I am unarm'd, forgo this vantage, Greek" (5.8.9) Despite his plea, Achilles yells, "Strike, fellows, strike, this is the man I seek" as he and his men slay him (5.8.10). With Achilles being clouded by an emotional breakdown, Hector is taken advantage of.

Not unique to war but often a part of it, women find themselves treated as commodities to be traded and bartered. Calchas, father of Cressida, foolishly requests her being traded into the Greek camp from Troy. Finding Cressida of no value to the kingdom, the Trojan princes trade her for the warrior Antenor in return. Pandarus informs her of the trade: "Thou must be gone, wench, thou must be gone; thou art chang'd for Antenor. Thou must to thy father, and be gone from Troilus" (4.2.90-92). Broken-hearted, Troilus and Cressida pledge their loyalty to each other, ultimately separated. As a result, their relationship is destroyed and Cressida is put into a position needing to choose between two evils: to be the camp prostitute or to be the woman of one man, Diomedes.

Unique to *Troilus and Cressida*, though not to warfare, is the social shame of being known as the descendant of a traitor. Cressida's uncle, Pandarus, believes she should have gone with her father when he left. Pandarus says, "She's a fool to stay behind her father, let her go to the Greeks" (1.1.80-81). Had she been considered as valuable as Helen was, there would have been no trade. Because she is daughter to a traitor, she is traded with no questions asked.

Not only does *Troilus and Cressida* illustrate the breakdowns of warfare; Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* also parallels the same problems seen in war in *Troilus and Cressida*. In *Henry the Fifth*, the start of the war reveals the selfishness of both the church leaders and King Henry. Parliament wants to take the Church's land to provide funding the war, so the two bishops need to find a way to save the lands of the church. The Bishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely arrive at a plan to save their land—by showing Henry further justifications for the war. King Henry asks the bishops, "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96). The bishops, eager to execute their plan, give a long and thorough reassurance for the war. Canterbury replies, "The sin upon my head, dread sovereign!/ For in the book of Numbers is it writ,/ When the man dies, let the inheritance/ Descend unto the daughter" (1.2.97-100). Here the bishop justifies the war using the Bible for inheritance of land, assuring him of the right to take land and be king. The conversation continues to affirm Henry in the right to take land and in his judgment. In their attempts to save their land, they never plead for a peaceful resolution, which would save the lives of many people. This is a great fault of the bishops, since many souls would perish and face eternity. The condition of people's souls and lives should have been more important to them than church property.

King Henry also has selfish reasons for starting a war. Henry is insulted that the French king had sent him tennis balls as a gift, as if he were a small child. Henry says, "When we have match'd our rackets to these balls,/ We will in France, by God's grace, play a set/ Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard./ Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler/ That all the courts of France will be disturb'd/ With chaces" (1.2.261-266). As a result of this insult, Henry tells France's ambassadors that he will take vengeance for the land he believes is rightfully English property.

In France, the commoners suffer in multiple ways and the land is abandoned and destroyed. Near the end of the play, the Duke of Burgundy gives an extended metaphor of the destruction of the land and the people of France. Burgundy laments:

Our fertile France, put up her lovely visage?
 Alas, she hath from France too long been chas'd,
 And all her husbandry doth lie in heaps,
 Corrupting in it own fertility.
 Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,
 Unpruned dies; her hedges even-pleach'd,
 Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,
 Put forth disorder'd twigs...
 Even so our houses, and ourselves, and children,
 Have lost, or do not learn for want of time.
 The sciences that should become our country,
 But grow like savages—as soldiers will
 That nothing do but meditate on blood—
 To swearing and stern looks, defus'd attire,
 And everything that seems unnatural. (5.2.37-44, 56-62)

The land has gone to waste as warriors abandoned their farms and vineyards to fight in the war. For both the children and adults, their lives have been so consumed by the war that the warriors' mentality has taken over their demeanors. "Swearing and stern looks," unnatural to the people of France, now are the everyday language and attitudes of the people. The people suffer the consequences, creating the altered standard state of mind.

Henry the Fifth also has traitors in the play. For the English, traitors are within the camp, illuminating a breakdown in the English army. At the discovery of Cambridge's, Scroop's, and Grey's betrayal, Henry tells of the depth of the offense. Henry says of them,

See you, my princes and my noble peers,
 These English monsters! My Lord of Cambridge here,
 You know how apt our love was to accord
 To furnish [him] with all appertinents
 Belonging to his honor; and this man/
 Hath, for a few light crowns, lightly conspir'd
 And sworn unto the practices of France
 To kill us here in Hampton. To the which

This knight, no less for bounty to us
 Than Cambridge is, hath likewise sworn. But O,
 What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop, thou cruel,
 Ingrateful, savage, and inhuman creature?
 Thou that didst bear the key of all my counsels,
 That knew'st the very bottom of my soul,
 That (almost) mightst have coin'd me into gold,
 Wouldst thou have practic'd on me, for thy use? (2.2.84-99)

Speaking of two of the three traitors, Henry tells of the great betrayal he feels. The crime the three are guilty of is treason and the plot to murder King Henry. Henry continues, "Treason and murder ever kept together,/ As two yoke-devils sworn to either's purpose,/ Working so grossly in [a] natural cause/ That admiration did not hoop at them" (105-108). Because of their disloyalty, the three are sentenced to death.

Another internal breakdown is the bitter attitudes of the soldiers. Michael Williams, a commoner-now-soldier in the war, speaks to King Henry while the king is disguised. Henry wants to know what the soldiers are thinking, and Henry learns a heavy lesson from Williams. The discussion between the two educates Henry in the difference between the king and the commoner:

Williams: 'Tis certain, every man that dies ill, the ill upon his own head,
 the King is not to answer for it.
 Henry: I myself heard the King say he would not be ransomed.
 Williams: Ay, he said so, to make up fight cheerfully; but when our
 throats are cut, he may be ransom'd, and we ne'er the wiser. (4.1.188-189,
 190-194).

Though Henry denies the king would commit such to an atrocious betrayal, this conversation leaves Henry thinking much about his role in the war. He is forced to consider whether or not he should have led his men into war, potentially to their deaths.

Over the course of time, many realize war turns man into a beast, altering their personalities temporarily and permanently. King Henry himself acknowledges this change in the

warriors. As part of one of the most famous speeches in Shakespeare, Henry says, “In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man/ As modest stillness and humility;/ But when the blast of war blows in our ears,/ Then imitate the action of the tiger” (3.1.3-6). Though peacefulness and humility are admirable qualities for a person, these characteristics are disregarded and undesirable in warfare. Henry calls the men to denounce their convictions and fight for England. As part of their moral conviction, the soldiers keep prisoners instead of killing them. As part of their forced moral denunciation, the men are obligated to kill their prisoners because of the necessity for survival. Henry commands, “Then every soldier kill his prisoners,/ Give the word through” (4.6.37-38). The English soldiers do not have enough men to both guard their prisoners and effectively fight against the French. Therefore, King Henry decides the best solution is to kill the foreign prisoners. This shows the moral standards of the people and how war alters the upright into beast-like warriors.

King Henry also has an important change of personality. As a new, young king, Henry finds his justification for war and plunges straight ahead. The most important aspect of launching the war is whether or not it can be done. Henry asks Canterbury, “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” (1.2.96-97) Finding legal and religious sanction is the most important concern of his. As Henry realizes the consequences of sending many men to war, he begins to have self-doubts. He says, “O hard condition, ’Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath/ Of every fool whose sense no more can feel/ But his own wringing! What infinite heart’s ease/ Must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!” (4.1.233-237). Henry finally realizes his one decision affects the lives of all those that follow him. If these men die, it is because they were sent to war by him. This creates a great tension within his soul. At the climax of the play, Henry prays, “O God of battles, steel my soldiers’ hearts,/ Possess them not with fear! The sense of

reck'ning, [if th' opposed number/ Pluck their hearts from them. Not to-day, O Lord" (4.1.288-292). Praying on their behalf, Henry pleads for the Lord to give the English victory and to protect his soldiers.

Still another concern in the war is the use of deceitful war tactics. In this play, deceitful war tactics are committed by the French. Fluellen, a commander in Henry's army, remarks, "Kill the poys and the luggage! 'Tis expressly against the law of arms. 'Tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can be offert; in your conscience, now, is it not?" (4.6.1-4).

Completely astounded, Fluellen resents the French army for the level of treachery they commit against the young, unarmed boys. Reporting this to Fluellen, Gower replies, "'Tis certain there's not a boy left alive, and the cowardly rascals that ran from the battle ha' done this slaughter" (4.6.5-7). Whether out of desperation or a planned attack, killing the boys was a violation of the "law of arms." This infringement leads to the deaths of all the French prisoners.

Just as in *Troilus and Cressida*, *Henry the Fifth* is further evidence for women being treated as commodities during conflict. At the end of the war Katharine, daughter of the French king, is given in marriage to Henry as a business deal, sealing the peace treaty. King Henry says to the assembled leaders, "Yet leave our cousin Katharine here with us:/ She is our capital demand, compris'd/ Within the fore-rank of our articles" (5.2.95-97). Having little or no say in the matter, she is given in marriage to Henry as part of the war agreement. Earlier in the war, she knows this would happen, so she spends time attempting to learn the language (3.4.1-62). Katharine makes the best of her situation despite the fact she has no choice for determining her circumstances.

In conclusion, the ties between *Troilus and Cressida* and *Henry the Fifth* show the devastations of warfare and the subsequent social breakdowns. From selfishness and deceit to

the changing of personalities and suffering, all aspects of life—physical, emotional, and spiritual—are caused or affected by the tragedies of war. Shakespeare's plays reveal his honest attempts to unveil the causes and affects of cataclysmic events that so often shape the circumstances of both a country and its people. Perceiving both the valid and the unsound elements of war, Shakespeare seeks to bring alive and confound his audience concerning the dynamics of war. That which is often perceived as one-sided—either all right or all wrong—can have elements of both. Thus both the glories and the horrors of war become commentary in the bewildering elements of conflict, the shifting borderlines of right and wrong, and the gray area of what is acceptable and what is not in war. War is not all glorious—more often it is exactly the opposite: a horror.

Works Cited

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