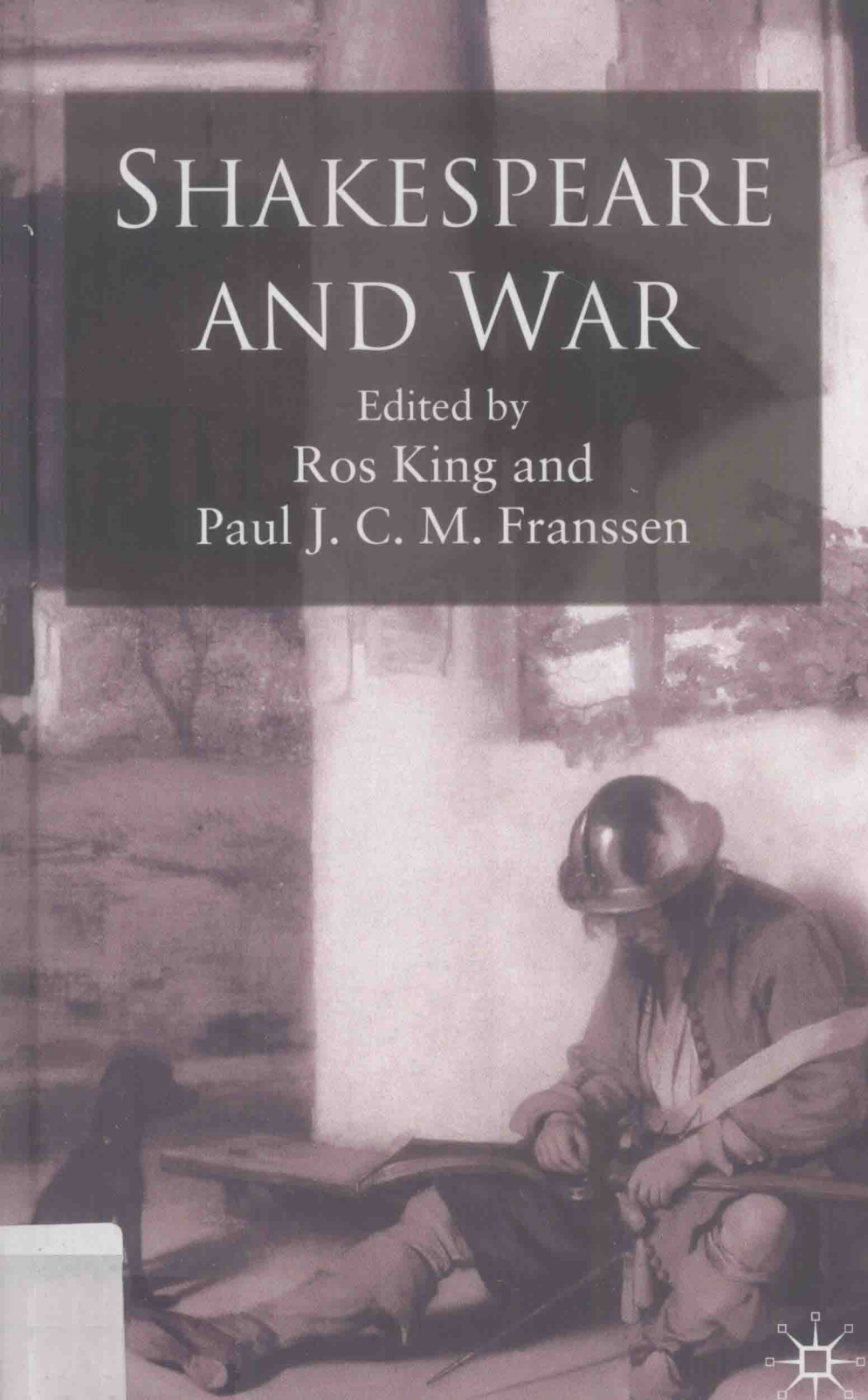
SHAKESPEARE AND WAR

Edited by
Ros King and
Paul J. C. M. Franssen



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War and Shakespearean Dramaturgy

Ros King and Paul J. C. M. Franssen

> Wherefore do you so ill translate yourself
> Out of the speech of peace that bears such grace
> Into the harsh and boist'rous tongue of war,
> Turning your books to graves, your ink to blood,
> Your pens to lances, and your tongue divine
> To a loud trumpet and a point of war?
>
> (*2 Henry IV*, 4.1.47–52)

Thus the Earl of Westmoreland, envoy of Prince John, to the rebel leader, the Archbishop of York. Rebellion, he says, should be dressed in wretches' rags not the church's white vestments of 'innocence'. The Archbishop reposts that he has 'justly weighed/ What wrongs our arms may do, what wrongs we suffer,/And find our griefs heavier than our offences' (4.1.67–69). His is the classic Christian argument for just war derived from St Augustine: 'For it is the injustice of the opposing side that lays on the wise man the duty of waging wars' (*City of God*, XIX.7).[1]

While Augustine deplores the suffering caused by war, he accepts it as an inevitable 'mark of human wretchedness', and a demonstration of man's need for God; 'social and civil wars' are 'wars of a worse kind', not because they cause more suffering than any other, but because they contravene the fellowship of a defined society (*City*, XIX.6–7). His arguments for the concept of just war are deeply assimilated into western political thought.[2] They have been repeated frequently during the time in which this book has been in preparation, as has the promise that 'peace is the aim of war ... it is this peace that glorious victory (so called) achieves' (*City*, XV.4). As he was also aware, however, the opposite is more often true; the usually unsatisfactory provisions for peace merely generate more war. Shakespeare's history plays, up to their hopeful conclusion

at Bosworth, certainly demonstrate that miserable fact. Even the 'glorious victory (so called)' at the end of *Henry V* is followed by the reminder of the losses of Henry VI, 'Which oft our stage hath shown'. It is perhaps significant that Shakespeare's later plays for the Stuart court dramatise the problems associated with James's policy for European peace in a form that revels in fantasy.

The first *Henry IV* play had been almost playful. Hal had appeared in various disguises; one of the rebels reports scornfully that he rides to the battle of Shrewsbury in polished armour with pennons flying, as if entering the lists of a tournament. Part 2 opens with the weary aftermath of that battle. Often treated as a mere sequel to Part 1, in fact it dramatises a much darker, more problematic attitude to war. The main characters are not just older, they reflect on their age, tiredness and lost ambitions; Henry IV never manages to undertake his crusade to Jerusalem, the ultimate religiously justified war, which by the eleventh century had been presented by papal authority as the supremely effective substitute for penance.[3] Bathetically, he dies in bed in the 'Jerusalem' chamber. The rebels in this play, while appealing to the justice of their cause, threaten continuing war down the ages if their demands are not met: 'And heir from heir shall hold this quarrel up/ Whiles England shall have generation' (4.2.48–9). This indiscriminate pawning of the future is shocking, and Prince John is so angered that Westmoreland has gently to remind him to stick to his plan – to agree to address their grievances and thereby trick them into discharging their soldiers so that they can be arrested and executed. This politic strategy saves thousands of lives although it brings into question the honour of his proceedings.

During the middle ages, it was honour, the chivalric code, which limited the deaths of soldiers in battle, although treatment of rebels at home and infidels abroad was not covered by such considerations; always, a 'degree of brutality in the treatment of civilians was accepted as a natural concomitant of war'.[4] With the revolution in military hardware, the site of war became the besieged, fortified town, which put civilians into the front line. In England, the natural defences of the coastline, combined with attempts to subdue Ireland, and speculations about a future union with Scotland, meant that by the end of the sixteenth century, the country was already unwittingly groping toward the concept of a 'nation-state', with all the tensions that that implies between monarch and people, and between the various, traditionally warring races of the British Isles. Shakespeare's plays therefore use ancient quarrels to explore more up-to-date political problems. Whether dramatising the Wars of the Roses, the struggles for monarchical independence (in *Cymbeline* and

King John), or for the Roman republic, the Shakespeare plays in which war features as a direct activity and subject are centrally concerned both with the identity of the nation and the nature of the contract between ruler and people.[5]

Shakespeare at war

George MacDonald Fraser, creator of the *Flashman* novels who served in Burma in World War II, is convinced that the ordinary soldier can have insights about Shakespeare and war that elude literary critics. MacDonald had ordered books from home, including *Henry V,* which he had studied at school and for which he had developed a 'deep affection'. Lying on his groundsheet one day he was approached by his sergeant who picked the play up, flipped through it with some scorn, but nevertheless walked off with it. Returning it a few days later, Sergeant Hutton asked him: 'Was Shakspeer ivver in th'Army?' Frazer replied that most scholars thought not, but Hutton was not convinced: 'Ye knaw them three – Bates, an' them, talking afore the battle? Ye doan't git that frae lissening' in pubs, son. Naw. 'e's bin theer ... An' them oothers – the Frenchmen, the nawblemen, tryin to kid on that they couldn't care less, w'en they're shittin' blue lights? Girraway! ... "There's nut many dies weel that dies in a battle". By Christ, 'e's reet there. It's a good bit that.'[6]

Whether or not Shakespeare really ever saw war at first hand, he cannot but have heard, seen, and read about its effects. There was a war being fought somewhere in Europe during virtually every year of Shakespeare's lifetime, and for all but a mere fourteen separate years between 1500 and 1700. Elizabeth I may have occupied the throne of England for forty-five years – longer than any other British monarch except Victoria and Elizabeth II – but longevity is not the same as security. The threat of war and invasion was constant throughout her reign, reaching a peak in 1588 with the Armada, and again in 1599, the year in which the Folio versions of *Henry V* and *Hamlet* were probably written. The 1580s and 90s saw English soldiers in official engagement in Ireland, in the wars of religion in France, and in the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule; English mercenaries were employed even more widely, and on all sides. Theoretical and practical manuals on warfare, which included copies of the standing orders issued by both English and Spanish armies in the Netherlands, and pamphlets on the interminable civil war in France were pouring off the presses, some detailing the massacres of civilians. Disillusioned and quarrelsome soldiers returning from the wars in France and the Netherlands constituted a public nuisance put down by a series of royal

proclamations in the 1580s.[7] In these circumstances it is not surprising that the majority of Shakespeare's plays have military backgrounds. Even the comedies – *All's Well, The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream* – use war as both backdrop and analogue to their ostensible subject.

Since war is the most terrible of human activities, it is difficult to acknowledge that it can be experienced in real life, and presented in play form, on all points of the scale from terror to farce. What marks out Shakespeare as a writer on war is that he recognises this and regularly presents contrasting states simultaneously. As a number of contributors to this volume demonstrate, Shakespeare's use of mixed genre in defiance of the literary theory of his time both injects a grass-roots reality of human experience and constructs a safe place for a satirical look at the state of England. These plays provide us with the entire gamut of possible reactions to war but never simply as human interest or simplistically as heroics. As one recent commentator on the reporting of war has remarked, 'Human interest reporting is not enough. Who benefits from letting war happen, which groups expect to suffer most and which least while the fighting is under way, who manages to do best from victory or defeat – these are political issues.'[8]

Shakespeare is aware of such responsibilities. Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors* and Antonio in *Twelfth Night* are in danger of execution merely because, as representatives of foreign countries and former wars, they come from the wrong place at the wrong time. Both plays bring them face to face with the political causes of their distress, Dukes Solinus and Orsino, respectively. These dukes do not make U-turns on policy although they do exercise clemency to Egeon and Antonio as individuals. Both plays therefore leave us, even in their happy endings, with a strong sense of unease. What is someone who is arbitrarily prepared to kill the thing he loves, like Orsino, but a tyrant? If a king is the husband of his people, as James I claimed in his first speech to the English parliament,[9] what is he doing putting them in harm's way, leading them into battle?

Shakespeare and twentieth-century propaganda

Shakespeare, however, has too often been used for pro-war propaganda. By the mid twentieth century, nearly two hundred years of thinking about him as national 'bard' meant that even fictions of his life could be enlisted in the national service.[10] On Saturday 13 June 1940, ten months into the Second World War, the BBC Home Service broadcast a radio

adaptation of Clemence Dane's stage play *Will Shakespeare* (1922), about Shakespeare's conversion from philandering husband to self-conscious artist aware of his national calling in times of colonial expansion and growing conflict.[11] Shakespeare is torn between his long-suffering wife Anne, his lover Mary Fitton, and his sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, who, in the climax of the play, enlists him as the national poet. For that, however, he will have to give up all other ties: the state takes precedence over his marital duty to his wife and over the dubious pleasures of extra-marital affairs. None of the listeners in 1940 would have missed the implications for themselves of Elizabeth's call for self-sacrifice.

Punch had painted a rather different Shakespeare in a satirical sketch published only a few months earlier, on the day after the German invasion of Norway and Denmark brought an end to the 'phoney war'. It consisted of a dialogue between Mr and Mrs Shakespeare about the pros and cons of Shakespeare joining the navy to help defeat the Armada. Mrs Shakespeare fails to understand why Drake, with his 'imperialistic wars', cannot leave the Spaniards alone, and does not believe that the country would be worse off under Spanish rule. Her husband thinks the experience of service might give him something to write about, but hesitates whether he is morally entitled to hazard his genius to the fortunes of war: 'Suppose that I am killed by a cannonball, and all my plays perish with me!' When he has finally decided to report to Drake the next morning, news is brought of the defeat of the Armada. The sketch ends on Shakespeare's disappointed exclamation: 'Damn!'[12]

Either way, whether Shakespeare's person is mocked as a ditherer or elevated as a national icon, his very name had become closely tied to war propaganda. Nor is this an exclusively British phenomenon. The various contributors to this volume demonstrate that Shakespeare was pressed into service in both the pro- and anti-fascist cause in pre-war Denmark and Germany. Brecht's adaptations influenced countless productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* in Britain, costumed in Nazi uniform as expressions of anti-militarism. The Nazis themselves preferred the comedies, although they revised *The Merchant of Venice* to get 'rid of the "mixed" marriage of Lorenzo and Jessica', in line with their policy on the Jews.[13] After the war, Shakespeare was pressed into service as a cold warrior.[14] A leaflet issued by the Dutch right-wing organisation OSL likened Claudius pouring poison into his sleeping brother's ear to the dangers of Communist propaganda. Shakespeare's texts were also translated and performed beyond the iron curtain to serve contrasting political agendas. Yet in more recent years, adaptations such as Peter Zadek's *Held Henry,* Tom Lanoye's *Ten Oorlog,* and Julie Taymor's *Titus*

have developed hints in Shakespeare's work to deconstruct notions of heroism and the worship of violence.[15]

Reading Shakespeare on war

In the face of such vehemently contested meanings, how should we read Shakespeare's graphic writing on war? Rather than merely adopting a post-modern equanimity that claims Shakespeare does not mean but that we 'mean by Shakespeare',[16] the contributors to this volume believe that it is important to demonstrate *how* the production of meaning takes place. Our objective has therefore been to distinguish between the texts that Shakespeare read and utilised in the writing of his histories, the possible significances that his plays would have carried under the political and historical conditions at the time he was writing, and the manner in which they have been rewritten, reshaped and re-presented to promote or critique the political and historical conditions of later ages. We wanted to keep clear in our minds the different levels of historical writing, story telling and political spin at all stages of the invention, transmission and reinvention of the plays that go under the shorthand name of 'Shakespeare'. An early decision was therefore made to avoid the use of the fashionable critical term 'appropriation' as having too flattening an effect to describe this process fully.[17] Ironically, the more common usage of that word is in a military context: the requisitioning of buildings and equipment by an army. In that case, the thing appropriated retains its essential structure while being pressed into new – even enemy – use. When Shakespeare's plays are reused to serve particular political ends, however, they are invariably rewritten, cut down, or else extracted and taken out of context, so that their ethical complexity, which is the very aspect which excites and encourages repeated reading and performance, is reduced to moral, instructional certainty.

With an estimated forty-one ongoing conflicts in the world today[18] it is unsurprising that Shakespeare's plays continue to be given contemporary meanings and significances. This book is about that phenomenon. It explores the cultural context that informed the writing of these plays and the processes whereby they have been reworked, translated, and interpreted to speak to later conflicts. We are therefore paying close attention to the way Shakespeare's language works dramaturgically. For example, partly because of the practical difficulty of representing a pitched battle with 'four or five most vile and ragged foils' (*Henry V*, 4.0.50), Shakespeare uses description as a way of avoiding having to stage acts of war. More interestingly, description can be used to create a conflict

between what is heard and what is seen that can make us question the veracity or legitimacy of the problem set before us. The wounds of the bloody soldier at the beginning of *Macbeth* are 'real'; we see them bring him close to collapse by the end of a speech in which he describes, with an admiration that is both inflated and also sanitised, the even worse wounds that Macbeth has inflicted on his enemy: 'he unseamed him from the nave to th' chaps,/ And fixed his head upon our battlements' (*Macbeth*, 1.2.21–2). This neat, bloodless unpicking of the way the body is stitched together, separating it into its constituent parts so that it also becomes 'unseemed' – unlike itself visually – is of course the way in which wars are usually reported so as to maintain support at home, except that the wounded, being too graphic a reminder of the cruelty and injustice of even the most justified war, are usually kept out of the limelight and not, as here, made the principal messengers. The presence of the 'bloody man' gives visual expression to the story he tells: a glorification of gore that purports to be a memorial for all the sacrifices and executions in the history of the world, 'to bathe in reeking wounds or memorize another Golgotha'. But Golgotha, the place of Christ's crucifixion, was already the 'place of the skull', reputedly 'memorising' the burial of Adam. The play's use of the term is therefore excessive, even blasphemous. The nature of the reality of the stage blood we see, the stylised and mythologised wounds we hear about, and those we imagine, together set up a question that will be a recurring theme in the play: at what point does heroic slaughter become grotesque butchery?

Criticism of Shakespeare, being historically a literary act, has often blurred the distinction between 'seeing' and 'hearing', reducing both to 'reading'. The critic's literary imagination has tended to take all descriptions whether of an offstage or an onstage event as of equal value. The audience, on the other hand, is having both its auditory and its visual senses engaged simultaneously. And what we hear *and* see may be structured so as to enable us to question what we merely hear *or* see. Posthumus's retelling of the battle in *Cymbeline* to the foppish lord who had run away, and who wants to be told a heroic tale of derring-do, is violent, even sodomitical in its language, in contrast to the formalised passages of armies over the stage described in the stage directions. At one point Posthumus resorts to ludicrous doggerel and vents his anger verbally, and perhaps also physically, on the lord not so much for running away but, apparently, for putting him to rhyme! The lord is terrified and runs away again.[19] The contrast between what we see and hear in the speech, and between the speech and the conduct of the war in other scenes in the play, is deeply unsettling. Such dislocation reminds us that