



'Scenes and acts of death': Shakespeare and the Theatrical Image of War

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SHAKESPEARE ET LA GUERRE

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Illustration de la couverture : DERRICKE'S *Image of Ireland*, 1586

«Scenes and acts of death»: Shakespeare and the theatrical image of war

In *King John*, II.i. the citizens of Angers, on their city walls, are greeted by heralds from the two armies which have just been fighting over their city. First, the French herald assures them that

victory with little loss doth play
Upon the dancing banners of the French. (307-8)

Then the English herald arrives with the news that his countrymen have been victorious and are coming «like a jolly troop of huntsmen» (321). This is indeed the imagery of war as feast, which François Laroque has eloquently described elsewhere. The citizens, however, are unimpressed: their spokesman insists that the two armies must go on fighting until one of them wins a decisive victory. The Bastard Falconbridge responds indignantly:

By heaven, these scroyles of Angers flout you,
Kings,
And stand securely on their battlements
As in a theatre, whence they gape and point
At your industrious scenes and acts of death.
(373-6)

The Bastard, of course, wants to emphasise the contrast between the reality of war and the fictitious spectacle which he feels the non-combatant citizens are making of it. Yet the effect of his lines is to remind us instead of the similarity between the battlements and the

theatre. For one thing, it is quite possible that the space from which the Citizen addressed the armies was also, on other occasions, a gallery for spectators. Moreover, the Battle of Angers, like the speeches of the two heralds, has been intended primarily to impress those spectators. In the same way, Bolingbroke and Mowbray in *Richard II*, I.iii. stress their festive mood («As confident as is the falcon's flight» [61]; «my dancing soul doth celebrate/This feast of battle with my adversary» [91-2], because each man knows that his confidence adds weight to his insistence on the justice of his cause. In both war and single combat, the self-presentation is crucial. Military success depends on deceiving the enemy; individual success depends on being noticed by the right people. That is why one of Castiglione's speakers advises the Courtier that he should always make sure to perform his heroic deeds in full view of the commanders (Castiglione, 112; Bk II, ch 8).

The theatrical battles of the Renaissance were designed to allow spectators to watch a battle in precisely the safety and comfort which the Bastard ridicules. They differed from a real battle, however, in that they had to be interpreted, so as to avoid becoming «inexplicable dumb show and noise». A dramatic framework often identified the contestants in terms of their allegorical or mythological roles and provided a conclusion for their display of skill. For instance, a theatrical combat designed by Jacques Callot and performed in Florence early in 1617 featured a forty-minute combat which was finally separated by the forces of a personified Love (Kahan, 80-82). Thus — to return again to *King John* — the very inconclusiveness of the battle of Angers is precisely what makes it seem theatrical. Moreover, in attempting to end the war by a marriage between the Dauphin and Lady Blanche, the Citizen himself takes on the theatrical role of reconciler. The relation between war and spectacle, and the accompanying uneasiness about the role of the spectators themselves, will continue to be a theme of this essay.

The public stage could not, of course, compete with

the elaborate mock battles just mentioned, but they must have had some features in common. Callot's illustrations to his entertainments, which include the choreography for his military manœuvres (Kahan, 36-8), remind us that movement by large numbers of actors must be essentially balletic while a trial of skill is meaningful only in the form of one-to-one combat. It seems generally agreed that the public theatres represented «war» through symbolic items like «drum and colours», offstage sounds, and perhaps armies marching across the stage, while the progress of the battle itself was indicated in a series of single combats (Holmes, 119). An example is the stage direction in *Cymbeline*:

Enter Lucius, Iachimo, and the Roman Army at one door, and the Britain Army at another, Leonatus Posthumus following like a poor soldier. They march over and go out. Alarums. Then enter again, in skirmish, Iachimo and Posthumus. He vanquisheth and disarmeth Iachimo, and then leaves him. (V.ii)

The single combat is thus a synecdoche for war, with each fighter representing his army. At Shrewsbury, although Hal and Hotspur are not allowed to arrange the formal combat proposed by Hal, in practice, their fight *is* the resolution of the battle. As Alan Dessen has noted in a chapter on stage violence (105-129), all single combats thus have an allegorical component. The history of theatrical stagings of war is largely the history of the balance between «war», depicted through design and direction, and «the fight», depicted through individual actors.

Our earliest picture of a Shakespearean battle scene is the illustration to *Henry V* in Rowe's 1709 Shakespeare edition, which may have been influenced by contemporary theatrical practice. It depicts precisely this juxtaposition of crowds in the background with a single combat in the foreground. The same is true of some of the numerous portraits of Garrick as Richard III, for example the one by

Sir Nathaniel Dance (c. 1770), which shows the actor waving his sword in the foreground against a vaguely military background. The battle might have been painted on a backcloth; the curious status of these illustrations, partly historical and partly theatrical, makes it impossible to tell. But the implication is that the only living, interesting figures are those of the foreground. The soldiers are an undifferentiated mass of local colour. While Rowe's anonymous illustrator has given the combatants period armour, Garrick is portrayed in an ermine-trimmed robe which seems highly inappropriate for the battle of Bosworth. Dance may have been conflating the battle scene with the earlier nightmare scene. But period armour would in any case have been inappropriate. Even though Garrick's costume makes a gesture towards the Elizabethan period, it is clear that his fight with Richmond is to be a stage duel displaying the skill of the actor, not a historical reconstruction of a medieval battle.

Contemporary with Garrick's production, however, the stage was developing a rival tradition of recreating real battles. The famous equestrian theatre, Astley's, was literally a theatre of war (DNB: «Astley»; BTM: «Astley's Amphitheatre»). Its founder, Philip Astley, had been presented with a fine charger at the time of his retirement from the 15th Light Horse. He displayed its — and his — talents at fairs, then in the theatre; in 1775 he and his wife appeared on horseback at Drury Lane in Garrick's Shakespeare Jubilee. The fact that Astley had been riding instructor to a number of influential people helped him gain audiences and patrons, and even the title Royal for the Amphitheatre, with both stage and arena, at which he and his successors performed their equestrian dramas. Many of these were highly topical, drawing on events of the French revolution and the war which followed (when he returned briefly to the army). Reviewers comment on the accuracy as well as the excitement of the Amphitheatre performances.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Astley's not only depicted recent battles like Waterloo, but also

ransacked history for material. When the chosen story happened to coincide with Shakespearean material, the adapters often used his play as the basis of their own, though, as the law prohibited dialogue in all but the licensed theatres, these versions necessarily emphasised battles, processions, and other forms of spectacle. Thus, while Astley's had its «star» horsemen, its playbills make clear that the appeal of its performances had less to do with individual impersonations than with the excitement of seeing a recreation of, for example, «medieval chivalry». *Richard III*, in 1835, was advertised as *The White and Red Rose, or the Battle of Bosworth Field*.

The effect of equestrian drama on the legitimate theatre was not, I think, confined to the occasional use of horses from Astley's in productions at Drury Lane or Covent Garden. It was Macready, in search of material for a revival, who took up a friend's suggestion that he might illustrate the Choruses in *Henry V* (Macready, I, 484). The play had previously suffered in the theatre because it had neither the comic appeal of Falstaff nor the dynamic central figure of Richard III. Macready clearly saw it as an opportunity to recreate the past, and, more specifically, the heroism of the past, in a way that Shakespeare himself had been unable to do. Thus, the first Chorus, spoken by a figure dressed like Father Time, was accompanied by a tableau of Henry with the three Furies leashed in like hounds. In the backcloth for Agincourt, painted figures on the backcloth, first seen through smoke, gave way to real ones as the smoke disappeared (Downer, 248-9). Macready himself, as Henry, conscientiously wore armour and tried (by wearing it all day) to learn to move naturally in it. What he sought was partly authenticity and partly the aesthetic pleasure of the gleam of gaslight on metal. His and Astley's dramas were obviously very different, but both offered their spectators the excitement of seeing the past brought to life, simply because it *was* the past.

Whereas Macready's staging suggested imagination becoming real, the famous Charles Kean productions of the 1850s sought to achieve a literal equivalent of reality.

They need to be seen in the context of another crucial event of the decade, the development of photography to a point which allowed newspapers to show pictures of the Crimean war and thereby encouraged the theatre to provide recognisable imitations of reality. (As late as 1900, Waller's *Henry V* is said to have copied photographs of the Crimean war [Mazer, 471]. Astley's production of *The Battle of Alma* (1854) opened with the embarkation from Southampton, featured patriotic speeches to crowds, and contrasted the British and Russian camps — all of which, as J.S. Bratton notes, is reminiscent of *Henry V* (131). Interestingly, the play also satirises the Russian ladies who (like the citizens of Angers) assemble to watch the battle as if it were a play. This stress on the *reality* of war, and the new ability to create an image which the audience could recognise as real, is the beginning of the process by which attitudes to «real» war have come to colour the director's treatment of war on the stage.

The staging of battle scenes, as opposed merely to single combats, implies a democratic approach to history which recognises the contribution of the mass of soldiers as well as the aristocratic commanders. However, nineteenth-century actor-managers were anything but democratic, and had no desire to deflect audience interest from themselves to the fates of individual «supers». This may be one reason for the popularity of the tableau, which emphasises the importance of the crowd but also keeps it firmly under control. Tableaux were particularly popular for battle scenes like Shrewsbury and Agincourt. Beer-bohm-Tree's *King John* (1899) featured a 2-stage tableau of the Battle of Angers, created partly by a painted backdrop and partly by actors in the foreground: those who were wounded in the first scene were dead in the second, while those who had been fighting were now lying on the ground (Mazer, 47-8). Tree was obviously sensitive to the cynical treatment of war in this play. After all, Shaw's *Arms and the Man* had been given its first performance in 1894.

Still, Shaw himself noted that *Arms and the Man* did

not become a really successful play until the 1920s, when war had become part of most people's experience. In 1938, during the «Munich» period, the critic J.C. Trewin noted that a *Henry V* directed by the West End star Ivor Novello in the style of a pageant lasted only 3 weeks, while it was just at this period that *Troilus and Cressida* came into its own in a modern-dress version at the Westminster Theatre (176-7). This *Troilus*, like Tyrone Guthrie's comic production in 1956, seems to have made Thersites a projection of its own ambivalence about the observer role of its own audience: in 1938 he was a war correspondent; in 1956 he became a camp follower with a camera (Trewin, 218). As if reflecting this uneasiness about the non-combatant, stories about productions in the 1940s tend to emphasise the unexpected relevance of plays to the circumstances in which they were being performed, and the dangers faced by the audience themselves, as when the Old Vic *Hamlet* in 1944 «opened in a blitz to the sound of gunfire and shrapnel» (Williamson, 165) and ended with the sound of anti-aircraft guns accompanying «Go, bid the soldiers shoot» (Trewin, 191).

It is perhaps not surprising that post-1945 productions of battle scenes have taken very different forms in the victorious countries on the one hand and in Japan and Germany on the other. The Brechtian influence on English productions may have been exaggerated, since Brecht himself was influenced by the flexible Elizabethan staging which contemporary English directors were attempting to recapture. The idea of performing the history plays as a sequence is a post-war one, possibly related to the critical studies which emphasised their unity of theme and possibly to the new popularity of the television series. It was evident that any such production would require some sort of permanent set. But what often passed for a return to Elizabethan staging was a set in its own right, an elaborate and distracting recreation of an Elizabethan stage. Increasing simplification led to the «Brechtian» use of an open stage on which battle scenes were created through such properties as cannon, carts, ladders,

and banners, and, above all, through filling the stage with smoke.

A more important aspect of Brecht's influence is the harshly satirical attitude to war (quite different from Guthrie's farcical emphasis), which has been most sharply emphasised in German productions: Peter Zadek's *Held Henry* (Hero Henry) at Bremen in 1964, Peter Palitzsch's *The Wars of the Roses* and *Richard III* at Stuttgart in 1967-8 (Hortmann, 221-2), and the *Coriolanus* at the Thalia Theatre, Hamburg, in 1977, based on a heavily adapted text by Hans Hollmann, which included the examination of the troops for VD and photographs of World War II atrocities (Daniell, p. 92). Some plays lend themselves better than others to this treatment. The *Henry VI* plays are clearly anti-war (at least when it is civil war), and this is one reason why they have been more frequently performed since 1945 than at any time since the 1590s. War in *King John*, the *Henry IV* plays, and the tragedies can also be interpreted cynically rather than patriotically.

What has been most transformed by the anti-war ethos of modern theatre is not war itself but the single combat, or, more specifically, the characters whose roles depend significantly on their taking part in such combats: Richard III, Prince Hal, and in the tragedies, Macbeth and Coriolanus. It is easy to underestimate the importance of this aspect of acting. It has been suggested that the Elizabethan stage made use of a «fighting actor» who played parts with few lines but long fights, like Tybalt and Ajax (Holmes, 134-5), thus guaranteeing a certain level of physical excitement in performance. Nineteenth-century touring companies are said to have relied on a similar functionary, known as the «Play-Saver». When audience interest in some historical drama flagged, it was his job to enter, sword in hand, at the first appropriate moment, announcing, «Ha! I know what you would, but you shall not. Draw and fight!» The fight would go on until audience interest had been recaptured (Marshall, 58). Even the most successful actors took fighting seriously. Martin

Holmes recalls «a wonderful and elaborate encounter» that Irving is supposed to have used in both *Macbeth* and *Richard III*:

It involved the dropping of a sword, its recovery after an attack with the shield used as a weapon, and at the end a slow stab with a dagger at the base of the throat, driven inexorably down against the frantic pushing of gradually-weakening hands... The effect was unforgettable, and on each occasion the protagonist appeared to gain an unexpected nobility by the vigour and valour of his end (149).

We rarely see fights like this nowadays. It may be that directors are reluctant to compete with film and television, on which violence can be depicted far more realistically, but I suspect that another reason is a reluctance to allow the moral impact of a play to be disturbed by the «unexpected nobility» of a villainous character. Actors are frank about the extent to which a good fight improves a stage role. Olivier, in an introduction to William Hobbs's book on *Stage Combat*, comments, «I have always felt strongly that a stage fight offered the actor a unique opportunity of winning the audience, as great almost as any stage speech or action.» Restoration adaptations show how thoroughly actors and adapters recognised the importance of having this opportunity. Lear, in the final scene of Tate's version, is seen fighting with the murderers before the rest of the cast arrive. Richard III and Macbeth are the two most important characters who, after an evil life, are given the opportunity to win back the audience's admiration by a superb fight and stage death. Davenant's *Macbeth* and Cibber's *Richard III* have death speeches. When reverence for Shakespeare's text forced actors to forego these added lines, the fight became even more important in their conception of the role.

Since the decline of the actor-manager, however, this conception has generally been subordinated to the overall

design of the production and its attitude to war. The effect of this subordination is particularly significant in the case of Richard III. Though the lines state that the king, in battle, «enacts more wonders than a man» (V.vii.2), in most recent productions this is simply not true. Thus, the Richard of the Stratford-upon-Avon *Wars of the Roses* in 1964 was a psychopathic symbol of the horrors which had afflicted England for the last fifty years, not remotely capable of fighting anyone. Some directors refuse to depict anything so simple and definitive as the victory of good over evil in single combat. Others make Richmond a nonentity or imply that he will be no better than Richard was. In Stuttgart in 1968, the last part of the *Wars of the Roses* intercut Richmond's final speech with the reading of a list of those killed in the battle, so that the name of «Richard Gloster» fell into place as just one of many war dead (Zander, 121-2). Sometimes the ghosts return and help to kill Richard, directly or indirectly, as in the RSC «Plantagenets» (1988) or Clifford Williams' production with Derek Jacobi (1989).

There is less explicit evidence that Macbeth's last fight is meant to be heroic, but Marvin Rosenberg's impressive accumulation of performance accounts indicates that it has nearly always been played in that way (634-48). For one thing, Macbeth is more complexly evil than Richard; also, as some treatments of Malcolm show, directors are more willing to allow Macduff's triumph in a private revenge over the man who killed his family than to endorse the idea of a just war or a good ruler. However, the precise nature of the fight is left vague in the Folio. When, in 1955, Olivier's *Macbeth* followed the direction to «exit fighting» with Macduff, Kenneth Tynan commented on his own sense of frustration: «We wanted to see how he would die, and it was not he but Shakespeare who let us down» (Tynan, 118).

The implications of Tynan's remark are interesting. Who was it that «we» wanted to see die: Macbeth or Olivier? The stage fight in *Macbeth* is notoriously dangerous. Legends tell not only of fatal accidents in «the Scot-

tish play» but of actors getting carried away and becoming genuinely murderous (Rosenberg, 640). It has been argued that the theatre differs from the circus in that the one is «a spectacle of illusion» and the other «a spectacle of actuality» (Hippisley Coxe, 109). Perhaps theatre is now becoming more like circus again, as exemplified by the growth of theatre-in-the-round, a form designed, like the circus ring, to show that it has nothing to hide. In the circus-like finale of Chinese opera, considerations of the moral aspect of war seem totally submerged by the spectacular performance skills of the actors: the soldiers somersault away as they are killed and return to be killed again. But the stage fight of Western theatre belongs to actuality as well as to illusion: the actors really are giving a demonstration of skill, and the very fact that it has to be so carefully learned is proof of its «real» danger. The citizens of Angers are blamed for treating war as a spectacle; in the case of modern spectators, perhaps the danger is that they may secretly hope that the spectacle will become real.

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