

‘THY HUNGER-STARVED MEN’: SHAKESPEARE’S *HENRY* PLAYS AND THE
CONTEMPORARY LOT OF THE COMMON SOLDIER

Shortly after the removal of the dead Henry V’s body at the beginning of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, a messenger from France arrives and disturbs the reverie of the various nobles gathered for the funeral with news of English defeats in the field. In answer to Exeter’s query concerning what treachery had caused the loss of territory to the French, the messenger replies:

MESS. No treachery, but want of men and money.

Amongst the soldiers this is muttered -

That here you maintain several factions:

And whilst a field should be dispatch’d and fought,

You are disputing of your generals....

(*1 Henry VI*, I.1.68-73)¹

In this analysis, the ordinary soldiers demonstrate a clear perception of the situation with regard to the division between the nobles, and understand that such factionalism will lead to the squandering of the fruits of earlier battles. Moreover, it is important that they also

¹*King Henry VI Part One*, ed. by Andrew S Cairncross., Arden (London: Methuen, 1962). All quotations taken from this edition.

describe the need for money, because it articulates the dire situation the ordinary soldiers find themselves in throughout the play. Later in the same scene we are told that ‘The English army is grown weak and faint’, and that ‘The Earl of Salisbury ... / ... hardly keeps his men from mutiny’ (I.1.158-160). The French are aware of the plight of the opposition soldiers, Charles saying that ‘the famish’d English, like pale ghosts, / Faintly beseige us one hour in a month’ (I.2.7-8.), and La Pucelle telling Talbot to ‘Go, go, cheer up thy hunger-starved men’ (I.5.16.). The plight of the ordinary soldier is a concern that surfaces more than once in the play, though it is perhaps not surprising that Shakespeare should highlight such an issue given certain contemporary events that took place around the time that it was being performed in 1589.²

²Although the precise dates of production are unknown, late-1589 to mid-1591 are the dates assumed in this study. The reason for choosing these dates is grounded in the sheer weight of historical research, in that most (though not all) critics believe these to be the most probable. The most thorough study of this subject has been undertaken by the Arden Shakespeare editors, *King Henry VI Part One, Part Two and Part Three*, ed. by Andrew S Cairncross, Arden (London: Methuen, 1962-1969), and *King Henry VI Part One, Part Two and Part Three*, ed. by Ronald Knowles, Arden (London: Methuen, 1999-2001), both of whom set these as the dates. Other important studies find mid-to-late 1592 more probable; see Hanspeter Born, ‘The Date of *2, 3 Henry VI*’, *SQ* 25 (1974), 323-34. This particular essay enabled the placing of *2 Henry VI* in the context of the London Feltmakers’ uprising in June and July 1592; see Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1993), pp. 22-44. For a rejection of this aspect (among others) of Wilson’s argument, see Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 35-7. Evidence produced in this essay suggests the plays were performed between late-1589 and mid-1591.

According to reports collected in the *Acts of the Privy Council* and the *Journals* and *Repertories* of the Corporation of London, disbanded soldiers and sailors, who had been pressed for action in Portugal, converged on London and caused disturbances at the Royal Exchange on the 20 July, 1589.³ The ‘disorderlie proceeding’ of these ‘marryners and other lewd fellowes’, saw them attempting to sell their armour and weapons because, during their service, they claimed they had received little or no pay.⁴ The Corporation of London denied these claims, saying that the soldiers ‘have most falsly and slanderously given out that they weare compelled to make sale of them [their weapons] for that they receaved noe pay, which is most untruely reported’.⁵ The soldiers and sailors proceeded to cause a good deal of trouble both in London and at their point of disembarkation in Maidstone, Kent.⁶ Indeed, their behaviour got so out of hand that the authorities demanded that something be done, the Lord Mayor being instructed that they were to be ‘apprehended and ... laied by the heeles...’.⁷ This deterrent was unsuccessful however, and the Privy Council reported that the ‘maryners and soldyers ... do remayn about the Cytte’, indulging in ‘contemptuous behavvour’.⁸ The authorities decided therefore that these ‘souldiours and mariners which do resorte in great numbers to the said Cytie’, were to be treated like ‘masterles men and vagrant persons’, and sent ‘home to their cuntries’.⁹ Despite these orders, the 16th August witnessed ‘great

³*Acts of the Privy Council (1588-89)*, p. 416.

⁴These events are related in detail in *APC (1588-89)*, p. 416; pp. 420-1; pp. 453-4. See also *APC (1589-90)*, pp. 47-8; pp. 54-6.

⁵Corporation of London, *Journals (1585-1590)* 22: f. 202b.

⁶*Journals (1585-1590)* 22: f. 312.

⁷*APC (1588-89)*, p. 416.

⁸*APC (1588-89)*, p. 420-21.

⁹*APC (1588-89)*, pp. 453-54.

disorders committed by the souldyours' in Maidstone, Kent, as well as the suppression of rioting mariners at the Royal Exchange.¹⁰ On the 20 August, 1589, day and night watches were set up in order to discourage the soldiers from assembling, not least 'bycause their Lordships are informed that some of the souldiers have of late offered violence to persons they have mett withall on the highe waye, and have taken money from them by force...'.¹¹ A Royal Proclamation was passed stating that they were to be sent back to the county in which they were pressed in order to receive any payment owed to them.¹² Clearly the major cause of all of this disruption was the non-payment of wages, and the resultant hunger and poverty the soldiers and sailors experienced. There also seems to have been a marked reluctance on the part of the authorities to take these claims seriously. It would be tempting to suggest that Shakespeare was aware of these events and wanted to include them in his play. There is, alas, no evidence for such a suggestion. However, although Shakespeare may not have been directly affected by these particular events of 1589, in *1 Henry VI* he does seem to be articulating a common contemporary phenomenon, the wretched lot of the common soldier, one to which he continually returned throughout the following decade. His interest in this issue is particularly apparent in a famous encounter that appears in *Henry V*, written and performed some ten years later in 1599.

The confrontation between the soldier Michael Williams on one side and King Henry V and Fluellen on the other in IV.8. of *Henry V*, ends with the King offering Williams a glove filled with crowns, and the soldier replying 'I will none of your money'.¹³ It is a troubling

¹⁰*APC (1589-90)*, pp. 47-8.

¹¹*APC (1589-90)*, p. 54.

¹²*APC (1589-90)*, pp. 54-6.

¹³*Henry V*, IV.8.69. All quotations are taken from the Arden edition of *Henry V*, ed. by T. W. Craik (London: Routledge, 1996).

moment in the play, because it articulates a scene of conflict and disunity between members of the same army. The confrontation erupts on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, as Henry goes about the camp in disguise attempting to cheer his men in preparation for the following day's efforts. Though he is supposed to give his men heart for the fight, Henry immediately finds himself in an argument with Williams and goes on to tell him that many of the English soldiers are criminals and murderers, who therefore deserve no better fate than to die, painfully, on the battlefield. In soliloquy, he subsequently proceeds to call the soldiers fools, slaves, and beggars, an attitude which undermines his soldiers' already low morale. In their first meeting, Williams explains to Henry the reasons for this low morale amongst the soldiers, detailing their main complaints. He says:

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 [...] 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 (*Henry V*, IV.1.134-141).

This reflects the reality of the common soldier's lot in the army of Elizabeth I, for whom, according to C. G. Cruickshank, 'wars held only hardship and misery', and who were 'powerless to alleviate their suffering'.¹⁴ Cruickshank details the various hardships under which the soldiers suffered, corruption of the upper ranks and the consequent non-payment of wages (Williams' 'debts they owe') being chief among them. This particular dramatised

¹⁴C. G. Cruickshank, *Elizabeth's Army* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 13. Also important in this context is Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (London: Routledge, 1967).

encounter between the common soldier and his commander-in-chief is reminiscent of an actual confrontation which took place some years before the play was written.

In a letter preserved in the *Calendar of State Papers (Foreign)*, Captain Peter Crips reports on an event which occurred during the Netherlands campaign, in the army camp in Utrecht, on 28 March, 1586. Captain Crips's explanation of the origins of a mutiny by the soldiers is worth reproducing here at length:

The Earl of Leicester going to Count Maurice to dinner, there came certain soldiers of Capt. Thomas Poole's company, and one A. T. in behalf of the rest, demanded their pay. His Excellency conferred with Sir John Norreys, who commanded me, Peter Crips, then marshal, to take and hang the said A. T., whom I carried to prison. Then all the soldiers in the town "grew into arms", broke open the prison, carried away the said A. T. and offered to shoot at me and my men, staying me by force while the prisoner was carried away.

At that instant, two companies of "Welshmen" came into the town, by whose aid the prisoner was again committed to prison, with nine of the chief mutineers. Sir John then ordered every company to march severally to camp, and when they were ready, came to his own company, and finding one using mutinous words, struck him and hurt him in the arm and sent him to the marshal; and another being not ready, cut him on the head, "who are both living without danger of death, except they be hanged [...] but the report was that they were both dead".

The companies then marched towards the camp, and being out of the town, those in the Marshalsea accused one Roger Greene of being "one of the principal that brake up the prison". Whereupon Sir John sent Captain Roper to fetch him. Being sent back, I carried him and the rest before his Excellency, who gave order that Doctor Clarke and I should examine

them; who giving information to his Excellency he gave me commission for the [hangin]g of three of them in the presence of the other seven [...].¹⁵

This report refers to an event that took place thirteen years before the first performance of *Henry V* (and three years before *1 Henry VI*), but does in many ways articulate the same basic complaints voiced by Williams: the contempt in which the common soldiers are held by their military chiefs, and their inability to alleviate their situation. When compared with this incident, it would seem that Williams in fact escaped quite lightly in his confrontation with Henry, in the sense that he was not despatched immediately

The contempt in which the ordinary soldiers were held by their military superiors characterised the long-running Irish campaign particularly, as is demonstrated by the following report held in the *Calendar of State Papers (Ireland)*, for December 1596: Of all the captains in Ireland, Sir Thomas North hath from the beginning kept a most miserable, unfurnished, naked, and hunger-starven band. Many of his soldiers died wretchedly and woefully at Dublin; some whose feet and legs rotted off for want of shoes [...].¹⁶

¹⁵*CSP (Foreign) (Sept 1585-May 1586)*, p. 495. For a more in depth consideration of this report and its connection with the Williams/Henry scene, see William Leahy, ‘All would be Royal: The Effacement of Disunity in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*’, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 138 (2002), 89-98.

¹⁶*CSP (Ireland) (1596-97)*, p. 195.

This is a typical example of the condition of the ordinary soldiers in Ireland, and one of many that reports the possibility of their mutiny.¹⁷ According to Christopher Highley, such reports are significant in the sense that, against the ‘backdrop of these conditions [...] the reiterated image in *Henry V* of an English army starving and sick in the field had an inescapable topical valence’.¹⁸ Such is particularly the case given the fact that the Earl of Essex was so involved in the Irish campaign at the time the play was written, and is referred to by the Chorus in the play itself.¹⁹

These contemporary records shed much light upon the confrontation of King Henry and Williams, articulating tension in the relationship of military leaders and their soldiers as well as clarifying the reasons for this tension. The topical valence of the Henry/Williams scene is further underlined with the appearance of Fluellen, and his response to Williams’ refusal to accept the gloveful of crowns offered by Henry. Fluellen says:

It is with a good will. I can tell you, it will serve you to mend your shoes. Come, wherefore should you be so pashful? Your shoes is not so good. ‘Tis a good shilling, I warrent you, or I will change it (*Henry V*, IV.8.70-74).

The character of Fluellen can be seen, in his uncritical loyalty to Henry, as an example of the ‘Welshmen’ that Captain Crips writes about and, in his recommendation that Williams accept the money in order to mend his shoes, to be articulating a contemporary need of the soldiers whose ‘feet and legs rotted off’. If Williams were to accept Henry’s money he could, in a

¹⁷*CSP (Ireland) (1598-99)*, p. 357.

¹⁸Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 139.

¹⁹*Henry V*, V.0.30-34.

sense and despite his hardships, be said to have his price, like those who pressed him into service, and those who made illicit earnings from the military campaign in Ireland.²⁰ Williams does not appear to want the money however. Nor does he want to fight wars that seem to him to lack good cause, and which seem to promise either a horrible death or maiming. Henry, it would seem, has little time or care for such matters, just as actual commanders in the Low Countries and in Ireland. The representation of Michael Williams thus seems to reflect both an actual contemporary problem and a reality probably well known to many of Shakespeare's audience.²¹

Peter Crips's letter from 1586 is one of many reports describing the desperate circumstances serving soldiers endured around this period and which led to serious outbreaks of dissatisfaction among English soldiers. Troops in Ostend, for example, at around the same time as the events in London and Maidstone (July-August, 1589), felt the need to write to the Queen personally due to their dire situation. In their letter they stated that the 'soldiers ... humbly represent to her Majesty that they have long ... been in great penury', since they had been 'lying upon straw, the better part scant that, much less fire, not so much as candle to answer the allarums...'.²² This situation led the soldiers to take drastic action, and it is noted that the Privy Council 'had been informed ... of their mutiny and the imprisonment of the Governor, captains, and officers...'.²³ In November of that year Sir John Norris met no resistance when he entered the garrison with his forces, and arrested the mutineers. The report for November 19th states that 'the prisoners [were] brought forth, and one of every company

²⁰See Cruickshank (1966), pp. 17-40 and pp. 143-158.

²¹Shakespeare's audience was made up of all sections of the population, including disbanded soldiers.

²²*Calendar of State Papers (Foreign) (July-Dec 1588)*, p. 166.

²³*CSP (For) (July-Dec 1588)*, p. 166.

was executed, being in number nine. And upon Tuesday next following there was executed four more....²⁴

Another case is reported in June of 1587 whereby, due to lack of pay a company of ordinary soldiers ‘levied in the city for service in the Low Countries ... mutinied against Captain Sampson...’.²⁵ There seems little doubt that the population of London (and thus the audience at the theatres) would have been unaware of this mutiny, since the soldiers responsible, when captured, were ‘tied to carts and flogged through Cheapside to Tower Hill, then ... set upon a pillory, and each [had] ... one ear cut off’.²⁶ Taken as a whole, there is a sense that such contemporary evidence bears a resemblance to the representations of the common soldiers in all of Shakespeare’s *Henry* plays, a resemblance which becomes striking in the portrayal of Jack Cade and other common figures in *2 Henry VI*, performed in 1590.

In Act III of the play, the Duke of York informs us that he has seduced Cade, ‘a headstrong Kentishman’, to ‘make commotion’ against the King’s forces (III.1.356-8).²⁷ He has seen Cade fight with gusto in Ireland, and wishes him to do the same in London. The fact that Cade is an ex-soldier clarifies the sorts of demands he makes in his rebellion, based as they are in a general context of common need and hatred of the aristocracy. Thus his desire for affordable food, whereby there will be ‘seven half-penny loaves sold for a penny’ (IV.2.61-62), and his references to making it ‘felony to drink small beer’ (IV.2.64-5). Such carnivalesque inversion foresees freedom and liberty, and sufficient means to live. Furthermore, his inverted claims of nobility and his knighting of himself demonstrate a

²⁴*CSP (For) (July-Dec 1588)*, p. 322.

²⁵*CSP (Dom) (1581-90)*, p. 415.

²⁶*CSP (Dom) (1581-90)*, p. 415.

²⁷ *King Henry VI Part Two*, ed. by Andrew S Cairncross, Arden (London: Methuen, 1965).

All quotations taken from this edition.

deconstruction of aristocratic genealogy and empowering aristocratic ritual, thus demystifying the constructed and artificial nature of a political system based upon inheritance and the arbitrary distribution of privilege (IV.2.112-115). Moreover, the fact that Cade has fought in Ireland gives his anger a realistic edge given the desperate state of the ordinary soldiers there, as reported in the *Calendar of State Papers (Ireland) (1598-99)*:

It grieveth us not a little to see the nakedness of the soldiers for want of clothes and their poverty for lack of their lendings, to buy them food; both which wants not only maketh many of them show like prisoners, half starved for want of cherishing, but also it dejecteth of them greatly in heart, insomuch as we look daily for some great mutiny and disbanding...²⁸

The report proceeds to state that ‘if any of these companies should break, and ... steal into England (which we cannot prevent), your lordships may judge what will be the danger of the realm...’²⁹ These events, it should be noted, were being reported six or seven years after the performance of the play. Despite that fact, and as is clear from the words Shakespeare has Williams speak in his confrontation with Henry V, the lot of the common soldier was almost certainly common knowledge in London when the play was written. The actions of the disbanded soldiers in July and August of 1589 would seem to support this. The fact that Cade was an ex-soldier and a Kentishman certainly resonates in the context of these contemporary disturbances where, the records state, in Kent, these pressed men ‘demaund paie for their service’.³⁰ Furthermore, the fact that sailors were also heavily involved in these disturbances

²⁸*CSP (Ireland) (1598-99)*, p. 357.

²⁹*CSP (Ireland) (1598-99)*, p. 357.

³⁰*APC (1589-90)*, p. 57. For a discussion of the issues surrounding pressing, see the significant entries for ‘press’ (pp265-9) and ‘press-money’ (pp269-70) in Charles Edelman,

is equally interesting, as in the play, a ship's Master and his Mate are seen demanding 'A thousand crowns' to spare the life of a captured gentleman (IV.1.15). In this scene, which immediately precedes that of Cade, a Lieutenant declares that 'The commons here in Kent are up in arms' (IV.1.99), and Walter Whitmore, a sailor, goes on to kill the Duke of Suffolk. The contemporary combination of ex-soldiers and sailors rioting in London and Kent in late-1589 is relevant here, since it could well have fed into Shakespeare's play, performed shortly afterwards. Cade's call for an end to poverty and Whitmore's ransoming of the gentleman's life articulate a preoccupation with the hardships of the ordinary soldier and sailor, many of whom had recently been on the loose in London.

The precise nature of the situation of the common soldier is clarified in IV.8. of the same play, where Cade and his followers are seen rebelling in Southwark. As the scene proceeds, the Duke of Buckingham and Old Lord Clifford enter in order to parley with the rebels on behalf of the King. In his address, Buckingham makes Cade's followers three important sub-textual promises. Firstly, he wonders if Cade would be able to 'conduct you through the heart of France, / And make the meanest of you earls and dukes?' (IV.8.35-36) The implication is, of course, that King Henry would if they were to join his side. Secondly, he says that if they continue to follow Cade, in no time the French will be 'lording it in London streets, / Crying "Villiago!" unto all they meet' (IV.8.45-6). If they follow Henry however, the implication is that not only would this be prevented, but they would gloriously recapture the lost territories in France. Thirdly, and most relevant in the current context, Buckingham reveals that 'Henry hath money' (IV.8.51). This, naturally, appeals to the poverty of the common rebels. Importantly, all three promises are lies, and it is Buckingham's intention to trick the rebels in order to defuse the situation. This is clear from the very next scene (IV.9.) in which we meet Cade's followers (who have been won over by these

Shakespeare's Military Language: A Dictionary (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

promises) when they are brought before the King and Queen with ‘*halters around their necks*’. The King pardons them all, and they are dismissed. It is important to note the fact that, promised so much, these common men merely escape with their lives. It is perhaps a sign of the status of common soldiers that, promised money, as real soldiers were, they effectively become prisoners, and are then forced to fight on behalf of the King.

The individuals causing so much trouble in and around London in late-1589 had been pressed into the armed forces and then essentially abandoned to their fate. This would be a relevant issue for a large section of the playhouse audience, given that a substantial proportion of them was made up of common men, and that they were the very people who would be pressed. Thus they could find themselves in the position of both the real and the fictional ordinary soldier.³¹ This is particularly the case given that the very site of dramatic representation was also one of impressment, as is made clear by Philip Gawdy, who records the illegal impressment of individuals by the City authorities during a raid on certain playhouses:

Ther hath bene great pressing of late, and straunge, as ever was knowen in England, only in London, and my L. Mayor and the rest of the Londiners have done so contrary to their Instructions from the Lordes of the councill....All the playe howses wer beset in one daye and very many pressed from thence, so that in all ther ar pressed ffowre thowsand besydes fyve hundred voluntaryes, and all for flaunders.³²

³¹Particularly as London provided the greatest number of pressed men by far; see Cruickshank, p. 291. The pressed were taken from the common people and, according to Cruickshank, were of two sorts: ‘honest men taken away from steady employment ... and ... the unemployed, rogues, and vagabonds...’ (p. 26).

³² *The Letters of Philip Gawdy*, ed. by I. H. Jeayes, (London: J. B. Nichols, 1906.), pp. 120-21.

While it would be misleading to base an entire thesis on such documentation, not least because it refers to an event which took place in 1602, impressment was both widely practised by the authorities and hugely unpopular amongst the common people and soldiers. A measure of its pervasive use is its appearance in the last play of Shakespeare's trilogy, *3 Henry VI*, performed in 1591.

According to a highly influential reading by E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's 'most effective statement of the principle of order', is that which appears in *3 Henry VI*, namely 'Henry's pathetic soliloquy where he regrets that he was born a king and not a shepherd'.³³ Henry's speech, given the background of the tableaux of a son who has killed his father, and a father who has killed his son demonstrates,³⁴ Tillyard believes, 'Henry's personal tragedy', and his 'yearning for an ordered life' which, in the cosmic scheme of things represents 'the great principle of degree'.³⁵ The soliloquy that shows Henry's desire for the ordered, simple life of a shepherd rather than a king takes place in an environment of chaos. Tillyard is correct in his perception that this scene needs to be read dialectically when he states that 'Henry's speech must be judged before th[e] background of chaos'³⁶ represented by the familial killing, and it is clear that the speech of Henry in this scene is meant to be read in the context of the speeches of the surviving father and son. The actions of these two characters occur as Henry speaks, and his speech is interspersed with theirs, setting up a dialogue of inner thoughts. This dialogue is important in many ways, not least because it outlines the extreme experiences of

³³E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944; London: Chatto, 1966), p. 158. The lines to which he refers are *King Henry VI Part Three*, II.5.1-54.

³⁴*3 King Henry VI*, II.5.79-122.

³⁵Tillyard, p. 159.

³⁶Tillyard, p 159.

the participants, and the ways in which one level of society affects the lives (and deaths) of another. The status of the Father and Son has generally been seen to be important since Tillyard who, however, failed to comment upon the fact that these two characters inform us immediately that they were pressed. The Son who has killed his Father says:

SON O heavy times, begetting such events!
 From London by the King was I press'd forth;
 My father, being the Earl of Warwick's man,
 Came on the part of York, press'd by his master.
 (II.5.63-66)

The impressment of these two common men by their respective masters would seem to be the defining element of their personal tragedy, though it is clear that they are meant to symbolise much more than that.

This particular scene articulates the dramatic convention of the monarch bemoaning his position and responsibility assuring, as Walter Benjamin ironically states, 'the sympathetic public that nothing is more difficult than to rule, and that a wood-cutter sleeps much more soundly at night'.³⁷ In this context, it is interesting to review Henry's various contemplations of his own situation compared to those pressed commoners who have killed their own nearest relatives. To the expressions of horror and sadness of the Father and Son, Henry responds: 'Was ever king so griev'd for subjects' woe? / Much is your sorrow; mine, ten times so much' (II.5.111-112). He continues: 'Sad-hearted men, much overgone with care, / Here sits a king more woeful than you are (II.5.123-124). While this is indeed an example of conventional dramatic practice,³⁸ it is possible that Henry's bemoaning of his own misfortune would not have met with a great deal of sympathy from a substantial section of the

³⁷Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne, intro. by George Steiner (1977; London: Verso, 1990), p. 123.

audience, given the fact that they were potential victims of impressment. Such a reality is not only present in the words of the Son, but present too in the historical records.

It is possible, given certain contemporary events, to theorise that a proportion of the audience for Shakespeare's play may have been disconcerted by the consequences for the common people of the nobility's practice of impressment. This is particularly apparent given the belief that the play was performed in 1591, a year which witnessed a sharp rise in the number of men pressed, and particularly in London. The total for this year was 8,425 men, almost double that of the previous year and over three times that of the following year.³⁹ According to C. G. Cruickshank, the number pressed in 1591 was not reached again until 1596, when mass impressment took place in order to provide troops for the campaign in Ireland (pp. 291-2). Additionally, throughout the period Cruickshank examines (1585-1603), the number of men pressed in London was treble that of any other English county, and was six or seven times that of most other counties (p. 292). Indeed, there are a number of contemporary accounts which demonstrate a common resistance to impressment, which particularly manifests itself in confrontation with the representatives of the state. This is shown in such events as those already noted whereby ordinary soldiers mutinied after confronting the Earl of Leicester in 1586 demanding their pay, as well as the mutiny which occurred at Ostend in 1587. It is apparent, too, in the words of Williams in *Henry V*. The evidence which most clearly demonstrates popular resistance to the practice of impressment is that which delineates the problem of desertion, and related to that, corruption of the officers. According to Cruickshank, corruption and desertion were the greatest problems under which Elizabeth's army suffered, and evidence survives recording the constant need for

³⁸The soliloquy of Henry V after his meeting with Williams being another case in point:

Henry V, IV.1.227-81.

³⁹Cruickshank, p. 291.

vigilance on the part of the authorities in order to keep their troops in place and their captains from gaining illegal payments (pp. 165-73).

As already stated, 1596 saw a sharp rise in the practice of impressment due to the need for troops to be shipped to Ireland. It is interesting to note that with this increase came a subsequent rise in cases of corruption by those officers responsible for the recruitment of troops. Both of these issues seem to be being addressed by Shakespeare in his other *Henry* plays, the two parts of *Henry IV*, performed in 1597-98. Sir John Falstaff is the register of these issues in the plays, confessing in *1 Henry IV*: ‘I have misused the King’s press damnably’ (IV.2.12). Falstaff is, he says, ashamed of his soldiers because he has illegally allowed the best ones to buy themselves free: ‘I have got in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers three hundred and odd pounds’ (IV.2.13-14). This being the case, he is left with ‘slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton’s dogs licked his sores...’ (IV.2.24-26). He goes on to state that there is ‘not a shirt and a half in all my company, and the half shirt is two napkins tacked together and thrown over the shoulders like a herald’s coat without sleeves...’ (IV.2.42-45). Shakespeare returns to this issue in *2 Henry IV*, and indeed has a scene which dramatises Falstaff’s soliloquy from *1 Henry IV*. In this scene (III.2.), common men named Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, Bullcalf and Feeble are brought to the muster point in order to be recruited into Falstaff’s division. After Bardolph negotiates with them on Sir John’s behalf, two of the five, Mouldy and Bullcalf, are allowed to buy their freedom. Shadow, Wart and Feeble are then marched off to fight, their pleas to remain at home due to their unsuitability for military life falling on deaf ears.⁴⁰

It is clear that these scenes in Shakespeare have a comic function, and could, no doubt, have caused a good deal of merriment amongst the contemporary audience. However,

⁴⁰ In this context, see the entry for ‘levy’ in Edelman, *Shakespeare’s Military Language*, pp199-202.

it is also apparent that these dramatised scenes bear a resemblance to reports concerning the state of the common soldiers coming out of Ireland at the time. Furthermore, the willingness of Falstaff to take bribes also articulates a pervasive contemporary reality, a point noted by Cruickshank, who writes that those in charge of such recruitment knew that they could ‘make a fortune out of corrupt practices’.⁴¹ Cruickshank reproduces much of a report that appears in the *Calendar of State Papers (Ireland)* for 1596-7, which details at great length precisely the kind of activity undertaken by Falstaff and with the same result. These records refer to specific events in the town of Chester, ‘one of the main assembly points for troops destined for Ireland’.⁴² The report proceeds to reveal the process by which a captain would illegally enrich himself by falsifying the recruitment figures, and ends by stating that ‘the queen would have been better off to pay these captains a thousand pounds to keep them out of the army’.⁴³

Shakespeare then, continues to visit these themes and their importance is clear when it is remembered that they appear in his plays throughout the 1590s. Given the ways in which the common men were forced into fighting, and the conditions they faced once part of the army, it is perhaps no surprise that Shakespeare should be interested in these issues, nor that most military campaigns during this period witnessed cases of mass desertion. Important cases of desertion occurred in France in 1562,⁴⁴ in the Netherlands in 1585,⁴⁵ at Ostend in

⁴¹Cruickshank, p. 137. On this point see also G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare at Work: 1592-1603* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), pp. 129-30.

⁴² Cruickshank, p. 140. He is referring to *Calendar of State Papers (Ireland) (1596-7)* p. 172.

⁴³ Cruickshank, p. 141.

⁴⁴*CSP (Foreign) (Sept 1585-May 1586)*, p. 219.

⁴⁵*CSP (Foreign) (June 1586-June 1588)*, 2: p. 25. See also *APC (1590)*, p. 189.

1588,⁴⁶ in Cambridge in 1591⁴⁷ and in France again in 1592.⁴⁸ A series of reports in the *Acts of the Privy Council* for 1599 and 1600 demonstrate the readiness of the troops to desert, as well as the help which they received from the local population in doing so successfully. On the 5th March, 1599, for example, the Mayor of Bristol received a letter from the Privy Council concerning troops gathered in his city for dispatch to Ireland. The letter tells of the ‘notable disorders of a great number of the soldiers, both in running awaye and in making violent resistance againste their comandars’.⁴⁹ The Council also informed Edward Gorges and Samuel Norton, the local Justices of the Peace, ‘to have speciall care to prevent the disorders and running awaie of soldiers’, and assumed ‘somme fault of slacknes and negligence, without the which it were impossible for so many to escape thoroughout the countrie...’ (pp. 139-40). Earlier in the year the great number of soldiers deserting from Ireland became a cause for concern, not least because ‘divers of theis souldiers do give forthe very sclaunderous speches to discourage others...’ (p. 56). The authorities in this case were instructed that ‘in the meane season you shall see them imprested anewe and detayned...’ (p. 56). Another series of letters relate the tale of a troop ship bound for Ireland from Bristol which, due to bad weather, docked in Wales. This enabled many of the troops to desert and lose themselves in the Welsh countryside.⁵⁰ Another event of significance occurred in Hampshire in 1600 when in a march from the town where they had been levied to another town, ‘more than a hundred men had escaped’.⁵¹ It was reported however that not a single

⁴⁶*APC (1588-89)*, p. 387.

⁴⁷*CSP (Dom) (1591)*, p. 141.

⁴⁸*APC (1592)*, p. 309.

⁴⁹*APC (1599-1600)*, p. 137.

⁵⁰*APC (1599-1600)*, pp. 726-27, pp. 760-61 and pp. 787-88.

⁵¹Cruickshank, p. 63.

deserter was captured, because ‘Villagers had given the escaped men sanctuary in their homes, and had helped to smuggle away both them and their equipment’.⁵² The fact that the common soldiers were aided by the common people in their criminal activity demonstrates a general rejection of what was considered an oppressive practice, the seriousness of which is underlined by the fact that the deserters would have proceeded to sell their weapons, a capital offence in itself.⁵³

Shakespeare’s actual attitude towards the common soldiers and the conditions in which they found themselves is, of course, unknown. Even though these conditions are continually discussed in his *Henry* plays, they too, do not give us access to this attitude. Rather, they articulate a negotiation of contemporary concerns and events which, given their appearance in six plays written within a period of ten years, demonstrate a preoccupation with a situation that was persisting and seemingly degenerating. The fact that these matters continue to arise in the plays seems to suggest that the lot of the common soldier was a subject very much “in the air” in Shakespeare’s London and, according to the records, one which was giving the authorities cause for concern. This concern is understandable in the light of the problems in London in 1589 caused by the soldiers and sailors disbanded from service in Portugal and, given the difficulties of the Irish campaign, the topical threat to the authority of the monarch by the common soldier, Williams, in *Henry V* (1599):

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”.’ (IV.1.135-138).

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⁵²Cruikshank, p. 63.

⁵³For the selling of weapons see *CSP (Ireland) (1598-1599)*, p. 138.

