

# Shakespeare and Tolstoy on Peace and War

*John Gittings*

As we remember the First World War – and shall continue to remember it for the next four years – I shall take as my starting point for this enquiry into ‘Shakespeare and Tolstoy on peace and war’ a poem by Thomas Hardy, written at the end of the First World War, which poses the central question. It is a question which both Shakespeare and Tolstoy in different ways sought to address and to answer.

Thomas Hardy should be numbered more frequently among the so-called ‘war poets’ of the First World War (we should really call them ‘peace poets’). He was much older than those whose names we usually remember, Owen, Blunden, Sassoon and others, and unlike them he had no direct experience of this war. But ever since the Boer War, over a decade earlier, he had in a number of poems expressed his anguish on the subject.

And in November 1918, he wrote a powerful and moving poem which was called, simply, ‘On the Signing of the Armistice’. It concludes with this stanza:

*Calm fell. From Heaven distilled a clemency;  
There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;  
Some could, some could not, shake off misery:  
The Sinister Spirit sneered: ‘It had to be!’  
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, ‘Why?’*

Hardy had referred more than once in early writings to the ‘Sinister Spirit’ and to the ‘Spirit of Pity’ (most notably in his epic play *The Dynasts*) and he took the side naturally of the Spirit of Pity, and of the question which that spirit asked: Why? Why War?

Asking this question takes us beyond the position of being for or against war in

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general, or for or against a particular war, It makes us consider what are the driving forces behind war, and what are the means by which we can instead make peace or keep peace. It is a question which deeply concerned the early Christian fathers: for did not Jesus, they asked, say to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane ‘Put up your sword?’ And we may remember the great saying of St Augustine, that

*it is a higher glory still to stay war itself with a word, than to slay men with the sword, and to procure or maintain peace by peace, not by war.*

The question ‘why war’ was one which pre-occupied the humanists of the Renaissance, the philosophers of the Enlightenment, and poets, novelists and peace thinkers of the modern age from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. And it is a question which lies at the heart of the approach of any great writer or thinker to the intellectual and moral challenge of peace and war.

War is one of the most significant nouns to appear in the texts of Shakespeare, as we can establish these days by carrying out a computerised word count. Foreign wars and civil conflict are central themes in the two sets of historical plays (*Richard II*, *1 and 2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*; and *1-3 Henry VI*, *Richard III*). The story of *Troilus and Cressida* is set during the most famous war in literature, the Trojan War. Acts of war bring the plots of *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Coriolanus* to their dramatic conclusions.

And yet the adjectives which Shakespeare uses to categorise war are almost always negative and pejorative. War is ‘all-aborred’ (*1 Henry IV*) and ‘cruel’ (*Troilus and Coriolanus*), it is ‘none-sparing’ (*All’s Well*) and ‘mortal-staring’ (*Richard III*), it is ‘dreadful’ (*3 Henry VI*), ‘fierce and bloody’ (*King John*), ‘mad-brained’ (*Timon*), and ‘hungry’ for men’s blood (*Richard III*); it is a ‘hideous god’ which has a ‘harsh and boist’rous tongue’ (*2 Henry IV*).

Some who write approvingly of the phenomenon of war cite Shakespeare’s phrase ‘glorious war’ as if it implies approval – perhaps he even coined the term? Indeed, the complete line which contains this phrase is one of the most famous in Shakespeare: it is the line which speaks of the ‘pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!’. When Edward Elgar was looking for a title for his first two *Military Marches* (written by the way immediately after the Boer War in 1902), he chose the phrase ‘Pomp and Circumstance’ from this speech, but it is hardly an appropriate choice.

Context is all-important here. Let us reflect a little on this speech by Othello, for it is he who delivers the vivid word-picture painted by Shakespeare here of ‘glorious war’. It comes at the tragic turning point of

the plot of *Othello*, when the Moor has been convinced (falsely) by his lieutenant Iago that he is being betrayed by his wife Desdemona

*I had been happy, [he tells Iago] if the general camp,  
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!  
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,  
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,  
The royal banner, and all quality,  
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!*

This is hardly an untroubled hymn to war, but the desperate cry of a man whose mind is already gripped by delusion – he even imagines that Desdemona might be capable of sleeping with his entire army. The lofty images of war in this speech should be seen rather as a flight of nostalgia for the supposed simplicities of martial life which may be no more real than the phantoms bred by Othello's jealousy. And this bitterly ironical passage is the only time that Shakespeare speaks of 'glorious war'.

Let us look at another passage from Shakespeare which is sometimes quoted to support the argument that human beings are, for better or for worse, attracted by war and over the ages have found war to be more exciting than peace. It comes from a scene in *Coriolanus* where the servants of the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius have just learned that Coriolanus, the Roman war hero, has defected to their side, and they now look forward to Coriolanus joining in a war of revenge against his own people.

*Why, then (says one of them), we shall have a stirring world again. This peace is nothing, but to rust iron, increase tailors, and breed ballad-makers.*

And the other servant replies: *Let me have war, say I; it exceeds peace as far as day does night; it's spritely, waking, audible, and full of vent. Peace is a very apoplexy, lethargy; mulled, deaf, sleepy, insensible; a getter of more bastard children than war's a destroyer of men.*

The irony and cynicism here is unmistakable: it amounts to a parody of the arguments of those who argued in the Elizabethan age that you need a

good war to toughen people up – for there was a strong war party in the court of Queen Elizabeth.

This is not to suggest that Shakespeare's views can be simply characterised as anti-war rather than pro-war. Even leaving aside the tricky question of how we can ascertain Shakespeare's own views when they are always expressed through the voices of his characters ... However we should understand that for Shakespeare war and peace are always complex, not simple, issues, that in many cases the problem is handled with irony and ambiguity and, more often than not, that the argument comes down on the side of peace and against war.

The complexity of Shakespeare's vision may be gauged in a fascinating, but quite difficult, passage in Hamlet's last soliloquy, the moment in Act 4 when he stops hesitating and finally decides to take revenge on King Claudius for having murdered Hamlet's father. Hamlet has just watched a contingent of Norwegian troops march by – they had requested permission to cross Danish territory in order to invade Sweden – and he has asked a captain in the Norwegian army to explain what is the cause for which they will be fighting the Swedes. The Captain tells Hamlet that Norway and Sweden are in dispute over what he calls 'a little patch of land' which is hardly worth being farmed. It has, says the Captain, 'no profit in it but the name'. A classic territorial dispute, in other words, over something of no importance at all.

Hamlet replies to the Norwegian captain that

*Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats  
Will not debate the question of this straw:*

His meaning is that the military engagement is likely to cost two thousand lives, and a large sum of money, all for an argument over a territorial trifle – a 'straw'. And in the soliloquy that follows, he reflects that not two thousand but twenty thousand soldiers may

*... for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,*

But then Hamlet, who only a moment ago has regarded the dispute as senseless and a waste of human life, switches his view. He now sees it as reflecting a sense of honour which obliges the Norwegians to fight for this territory however worthless it may be. And if honour does not allow them

to stand by even though the cause be so trivial, argues Hamlet, how can he stand by and do nothing when his father has been killed and his mother has been taken into the bed of the killer? So he finally makes his mind up:

*O, from this time forth, (he concludes)  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!*

And the scene is set for the final act of blood and destruction, when Hamlet, his mother and his uncle all end up as corpses. Hamlet's argument which leads to this mayhem is, as one modern critic, Alex Newell, has pointed out, confused and irrational. For first he laments the loss of life which will occur when the Norwegian and Swedish troops fight over a scrap of land, but then he praises the sense of honour which drives them towards their slaughter (*The Soliloquies in Hamlet*, 1991, p. 77). But by doing so Shakespeare tells us a good deal both about Hamlet's confused state of mind and about the irrationality of violence and revenge.

We come now, as we must, to the consideration of *Henry V*, surely the one play of Shakespeare's which does beyond doubt celebrate martial patriotism and 'glorious war'. And it is true that the play has often been seen this way. In particular, King Henry's tribute to 'we happy few, we band of brothers' before the Battle of Agincourt has become part of the mythology of war in its most heroic, patriotic, and self-sacrificial guise. and it has continued to be invoked in recent times of British war, such as the Gulf War and the Iraq War.

This uncomplicated view of *Henry V* was questioned long ago by the essayist William Hazlitt, in his study of Shakespeare's characters published in 1817. Hazlitt wrote that the king 'seemed to have no idea of any rule of right or wrong, but brute force ...' and that because Henry's own title to the English crown was doubtful, 'he laid claim to [the crown] of France'. Henry is an appealing character, Hazlitt acknowledged, but it is the appeal of 'a panther or a young lion in their cages in the Tower'. The controversy over how to interpret *Henry V* has continued ever since, and it may be illustrated here with one striking episode from the play.

Not long ago the Shakespearean scholars John Sutherland and Cedric Watts published an essay with this deliberately provocative title: '[Was] Henry V [a] war criminal' (*Henry V, War Criminal, and Other Shakespearean Puzzle*, 2000). Sutherland's question was provoked by a particularly problematic episode in the play during its portrayal of the Battle of Agincourt (the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this battle is also being remembered in this year of 2015). Briefly, when the fight at Agincourt is

almost won, Henry comes on stage with his escort and, according to the original stage directions, ‘with prisoners’. Seeing that the French have brought up new reinforcements, he gives the order to prepare for further battle by first killing the prisoners. Here is the text from the quarto edition of *Henry V*:

Act 4, Scene 6 [Alarum]

King Henry V: *But, hark! what new alarum is this same?  
The French have reinforced their scatter'd men:  
Then every soldier kill his prisoners:  
[The soldiers kill their prisoners]  
Give the word through.*

Pistol: *Coup' la gorge.*

Pistol's remark in doggerel French makes the intention brutally clear. The editor of the Oxford Shakespeare text suggests that Pistol, who had his own prisoner in tow, may have performed this action on stage (Gary Taylor, ed., *Henry V*, pp. 65-6).

Now here is a rather remarkable fact. Neither Lawrence Olivier in his famous wartime film (1944) nor Kenneth Branagh in his more recent and much-praised version (1989) included this scene at all. Of course the killing of prisoners happens quite often in war, yet to show it on screen would have jarred with the heroic image of Henry, the noble warrior king.

*Henry V* was followed soon after by *Troilus and Cressida*, a play which throughout takes a jaundiced and cynical view of the virtues of war. From now on, Shakespeare's treatment of war becomes increasingly critical: his martial tragedies of the later period (*Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*) all have as their subject a general of great military prowess whose character is fatally flawed – by jealousy, ambition, sexual weakness, or pride.

Finally we may note that Shakespeare's last three plays all reflect a more mellow mood of peace. Peace is the last word of *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest* ends with the peaceful resolution of life's storms, and peace is the subject of the last speech of *Henry VIII* which looks forward to the mainly peaceful reign of Queen Elizabeth.

*In her days every man shall eat in safety,  
Under his own vine, what he plants; and sing  
The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours:  
God shall be truly known; and those about her*

*From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,  
And by those claim their greatness, not by blood.*

Let us move now from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, even if it seems over-ambitious to attempt to tackle these two great writers at the same time. They both present huge challenges to us. Shakespeare presents one kind of challenge to anyone who seeks to find out what Shakespeare thought on any particular issue, in this case the issue of peace and war. For Shakespeare does not speak directly to us but through his characters, he does not editorialise except occasionally in a few lines of prologue or epilogue. But if we know too little about Shakespeare as Shakespeare, one might say that we know too much about Tolstoy as Tolstoy. As well as his own autobiographical works, his novels contain fictionalised versions of himself – Pierre in *War and Peace*, Levin in *Anna Karenina*. We have his diaries, his wife's diaries, the memories of his children, of his friends and his enemies, the reports of the Tzarist secret police. We know what he was reading and his own critical views of what he read. We can follow the progression of his philosophy and idea, not to mention his personal weaknesses and obsessions over a period of some 60 years, almost thought by thought.

However we may simplify our approach on this occasion by concentrating on a very small portion of Tolstoy's life and thought – a portion of great importance but one that is often overlooked. Let us put to one side the last 30 years of his life when he embarked on his voyage of religious discovery and developed his ideas of what we now know as Tolstoyan pacifism. We may also leave a full analysis of *War and Peace* for another time. Let us instead concentrate upon Tolstoy's very early experience of war in real life, the actual business of killing or being killed, as refracted in the early writings in which Tolstoy reflects this experience, an experience which stayed with him for the rest of his days.

Tolstoy was still a comparatively young man, at the age of 34, when he settled down on his country estate in 1862, with his new wife Sonya, happier than he had been ever before, to start work on the novel which would become, over the next five or six years, *War and Peace*. So where did the wealth of descriptive and generally accurate description of the mechanics of war, and the horrors of war, come from? More important, from where did he derive the psychologically acute and vivid portrayal of the complex emotions which beset all those engaged in war, and most important of all, of the moral complexity presented by war to all those who are willing to think about it?

Ten years earlier, in 1852, disgusted with his spendthrift and idle life as

a young man in fashionable Moscow society, Tolstoy had joined his brother who was an officer in the Tsarist army in the Caucasus – the region now known as Chechnya and Dagestan. The army was engaged in trying to subdue by force the local people, the Tartars, some of whom collaborated with their occupiers while the majority fiercely resisted. Tolstoy was described as a ‘volunteer’ when he arrived there but he was really what we would now call a ‘war tourist’, an observer and onlooker. However he soon applied for and eventually obtained a regular appointment as an artillery officer.

Tolstoy’s diary for this period tells us that he was still struggling to improve his behaviour, without much success. He continued to gamble, this time with the army officers – he even had to sell the family home to meet his debts – and he continued to chase women, this time the local Tartar women. Tolstoy then and for the rest of his life was someone of many contradictions. But suddenly, in a diary entry of 6 January 1853, we find this short but revealing comment:

*A stupid parade. Everyone drinks – especially my brother – and it’s very unpleasant for me. War is such an unjust and evil thing that those who wage it try to stifle the voice of conscience within them. Am I doing right? Oh God, teach me and forgive me if I’m doing wrong.*

From the very beginning, Tolstoy was asking himself that great question posed by Thomas Hardy: Why? Why war? And Tolstoy posed it explicitly in his very first short story – only the second piece of his to be published. The story is called *The Raid*, and it is based upon his own experience of taking part in a punitive expedition launched against a hostile Tartar village. The village is burnt to the ground, but the army then has to retreat while being harassed by Tartar guerrillas, and suffers several casualties. This short story was published in a Moscow journal a year later, but with a number of cuts, most of which were imposed by the Russian censor. In the story, and especially in the material that was cut, we can see the beginning of Tolstoy’s lifelong enquiry into the morality of war. Tolstoy begins with this bald statement:

*War always interested me, not war in the sense of manoeuvres devised by great generals ... but the reality of war, the actual killing. [How was it possible, he asked himself, for a soldier] with no apparent advantage to himself, [to] decide to subject himself to danger and, what is more surprising still, to kill his fellow-men?*

Halfway through the short story, in a passage which also was cut by the censor, we find this already mature reflection.

*War! What an incomprehensible phenomenon! When one's reason asks: 'Is it just, is it necessary?' an inner voice always replies 'No'. Only the persistence of this unnatural occurrence makes it seem natural, and a feeling of self-preservation makes it seem just.*

The passage continues with a long reflection on how the justice of the Russian campaign against the Tartar tribes is balanced – we might say cancelled out – by the justice of those desperate tribesmen and their families who fear the destruction of their villages and who take up arms to resist. In another passage, also deleted by the censor, Tolstoy describes vividly how the general in charge of the Russian troops allows them to loot and burn the village which they have captured.

Two years later Tolstoy, having by now joined the army, applied for a transfer from the Caucasus to the Crimean front. He saw action as an artillery officer there spending some time in one of the bastions of the Russian defence against the British, French and Turks. But he continued to write, and completed three pieces of reportage. The first, published in a Moscow magazine, was fairly straightforward and was commented on favourably by Tsar Alexander II; but passages in his second and third instalments describing the blood and carnage of the siege were suppressed by the Russian censor as 'anti-patriotic'. Here too we find themes which will appear in *War and Peace*, notably, the way in which a soldier can feel himself to be invincibly brave at one moment, yet succumb to abject terror and fear the next ... the rapidity with which a peaceful scene with soldiers standing around and laughing and joking can turn into bloody carnage and severed limbs when a shell arrives in their midst, ... the tendency for those who have survived a battle to dramatise and embellish their own memories of how they behaved during it. All these acute observations, which illustrate both the horrors of war and the human capacity for self-deception about war, can be found in Tolstoy's three Sevastopol sketches from the Crimean War. (These sketches, as well as *The Raid*, are included in the volume published as *Tales of Army Life*).

When Tolstoy started to write *War and Peace* ten years after the Crimean War he had not yet reached the conclusion that it was a human obligation to resist war and not take part in it. But his exceptional sensitivity to the ambiguities of human behaviour still enabled him to convey in *War and Peace* the moral complexity of war, its fatal fascination, and its unmitigated horror – the one sometimes following the

other with terrible speed. This is powerfully conveyed in his description of the Russian troops at Austerlitz, fleeing in disorder and panic from the French across a narrow wooden bridge.

*It was growing dusk. On the narrow Augesdam where for so many years the old miller had been accustomed to sit in his tasselled cap peacefully angling, while his grandson, with shirt-sleeves rolled up, handled the floundering silvery fish in the watering-can ... – on that narrow dam amid the wagons and the cannon, under the horses' hooves and between the wagon wheels, men disfigured by fear of death now crowded together, crushing one another, dying, stepping over the dying and killing one another, only to move on a few steps and be killed themselves in the same way.*

Passages such as these may lead readers to conclude that Tolstoy already goes well beyond a sympathetic portrayal of human emotion, and of the haphazard way in which war unfolds, to convey an implicit judgement on war as such. Not all Tolstoyan scholars would agree, but the pioneering translator and friend of Tolstoy, Aylmer Maude (who with his wife Louise produced the translations of Tolstoy published by OUP which are still standard), had no doubt that *War and Peace* amounted to a condemnation of war. Certainly, it would take Tolstoy two more decades to reach the position that a true reading of Christianity requires one to reject violence in all its forms. However, in *War and Peace* Tolstoy had already moved a long way towards his later conviction that war is based upon a confidence trick: that wars are started by individuals with pretensions to exercise power, but that the reality of such power is a fraud.

Tolstoy set out his views on the nature of this power in the second epilogue to *War and Peace*, which like the other epilogues is often mistakenly regarded as wordy and superfluous to the book. Wars may appear to be justified by rational argument and decision, writes Tolstoy, but this is an illusion: These justifications release those who produce the events from moral responsibility; they are

*like the broom fixed in front of a locomotive to clear the snow from the rails in front: they clear men's moral responsibilities from their path. Without such justifications, there would be no reply to the simplest question that presents itself when examining each historical event. How is it that millions of men commit collective crimes – make war, commit murder, and so on?*

Again, Tolstoy is asking that same question, the question with which we started: Why? Why War? Why not Peace?

We may conclude with this reflection: Shakespeare as well as Tolstoy should be read with our ears wide open to all the subtlety of their words and the complexity of their thought on the subject of peace and war. The same, I might add, is true of that other great writer who stands alongside Shakespeare and Tolstoy – the third of the three giants who have had such a powerful influence upon Western culture. I am referring to Homer, and to Homer's *Iliad*. There is a great deal in the *Iliad* about the virtues and benefits of peace as well as about the heroism and horrors of war. But that is the subject for another enquiry.\*

\*I have discussed Homer's approach in *The Iliad* to peace and war in *The Glorious Art of Peace* (OUP: 2012), pp. 40-47. Some passages in this talk are also based on the discussion of Shakespeare and Tolstoy in my book.



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