

**Kill the Prisoners: Shakespeare's Henry V at Agincourt,
Just War Theory, and the End of Chivalry**

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Abstract

In England, Henry V is a legend. Shakespeare's play of the same name, which depicts Henry's surprise triumph over the French at the Battle of Agincourt, is probably the main source of the tradition. The outnumbered English did not follow the code of chivalry, but the French did so for the most part. Shakespeare thus forces us to consider a perennial dilemma: When is war justified? When Henry gives the order to execute his French prisoners of war, is he acting justly? What became of the Chivalric Code? We conclude that on October 25, 1415, in the muddy fields of Agincourt, chivalry—a product of feudal custom—died. The connotations of the word "chivalry" may be unclear to modern readers because it has been misused to imply, among other things, civility, particularly toward women. Nonetheless, some aspects of the chivalric code continue to exist. In its Oath, Law, Motto, Slogan, and Outdoor Code, the Boy Scouts of America embody their own unique interpretation of chivalry. Like other military academies, the United States Military Academy at West Point maintains a Cadet Honor Code. The International Criminal Court's Rome Statute, the Geneva and Hague Conventions, and other legal documents set up the parameters for conducting wars and outlawing particular actions. Shakespeare makes us think about the possibility that existential problems could lead to moral conundrums where there could not be a good option. This study provides guidance on how to approach the teaching and learning of moral conundrums, like the one that Henry V encountered at the Battle of Agincourt.

Keywords: Agincourt, chivalry, Henry V, just war, prisoners of war, Shakespeare, war

Introduction

Definitions

(adapted from ICRC, 2015; *OED*, 2000; Orend, 2020; and Stahn, 2006)

jus ad bellum. (Latin) Right to war. A just cause compelling war. This principle asks, under what circumstances may one party engage in armed conflict with another party?

jus in bello. (Latin) Right in war. Just behavior during a war. Here, an armed conflict having begun, what means may be used to prosecute one's cause and what means may not? This is the domain of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

jus post bellum. (Latin) Justice after a war. Essentially, mercy to the vanquished.

justice. Maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment; giving of due desserts.

mercy. Clemency and compassion shown to one in a position of powerlessness or subjection, or to a person with no right or claim to receive kindness; kind and compassionate treatment in a case where severity is merited or expected, especially in giving legal judgment or passing sentence.

morality. Behavior conforming to moral law or accepted moral standards; personal qualities judged to be good.

presentism. A bias towards the present or present-day attitudes, especially in the interpretation of history, e.g., judging the leaders and policies of a historic decision by today's different standards.

supreme emergency exemption. Allows a country victimized by aggression to set aside the rules of *jus in bello* and fight however it wants, provided there is an existential threat. In this study, we ask whether or not the order by Henry V to kill his prisoners could be justified by his calculation that his army's survival was threatened by a French counterattack that could be aided by the prisoners in their rear area.

The Research Question

This study aims to discover to what extent, if any, Shakespeare shaped the debate on just war theory (Quabeck, 2019) and the end of chivalry through his play, *Henry V*. At the outset, however, we feel the need to address that perennial question: Can a valid judgment be made about some historical event using today's standards of morality? This is the essence of *presentism* (Barnes, 2019). From a legal perspective (NPS, 2002; ARC, 2011), we would answer that it depends on the facts and the law. But which facts and what law? In this case, what were the facts when Henry V gave the order to kill his French prisoners of war, and what laws were in effect at the time of the battle of Agincourt in 1415? In the course of the study, we came inevitably to the corollary issue of chivalry and its demise at the Battle of Agincourt (Curry, 2000, 2015; Edelman, 1998; Kaeuper & Kennedy, 1996; Keegan, 1976; Saul, 2011; Simpson, 1999; and Spencer, 2015).

In the context of a university program in English language and literature, students acquire a working knowledge of Shakespeare's histories, tragedies, and comedies. Occasionally, a professor will observe that war is a part of many of those plays. Seldom, however, will students look at those works through the lens of just war theory. This study demonstrates the value of such a perspective, not only in understanding Shakespeare's plots, characters, and settings but also in discovering the more profound moral implications of the works.

Methods

We employ multiple methods of inquiry, the premise being that several methods can improve the validity of the analysis and evaluation of our understanding of Shakespeare's contribution to the questions of just war and chivalry (UCF, 2023).

The Traditional Method

The traditional method of foreign language learning in Georgia follows the Soviet top-down command model. If a foreign language center exists, its charter tends to be prescriptive rather than supportive, more an instrument of central control than one of service. Foreign language teaching tends to rely heavily on workbooks rather than works of literature in the target language. Curricula tend to be highly compartmentalized, with courses such as grammar, phonetics, lexicology, discourse, comparative typology, linguistic theory, and problems in morphology and syntax research, little of which relates to the real world for which graduates are presumed to be prepared. Surveys of prospective employers in the region indicate that graduates of programs with these kinds of esoteric course offerings cannot function independently in an English-speaking environment.

Adherents of the traditional method draw a sharp line between *language* and *literature*. They maintain that foreign language teaching and learning demands compartments. They reject the idea that one can learn a foreign language by reading good literature. This is how they learned, and this is how they teach (Giger & Sloboda, 2008).

Modern Methods

Foremost among methods of literary research is close reading, with a particular focus on a word or phrase, observing, analyzing, and evaluating facts and details about the text (Correra & Owens, 2010, p. 105; Culler, 2011, pp.50-55; Kain, 1998). Related to close reading are both post-structuralist literary analysis and cultural criticism. Close reading helps the study to focus on those words and phrases that inform the research question, words like prisoners, rights, and history, and phrases like "The king is full of grace and fair

regard” (Spoken by the Archbishop of Canterbury in *Henry V*, I.1).

Howe (2009) writes that close reading “allows students to examine the language and structure of a text, as well as the ideas or feelings it expresses, and to investigate the intricate links between form and content. It helps students to see such issues as sound and rhythm, imagery and figurative language, voice, the way characters are portrayed, the importance of setting, plot structure - all the elements that make literature ‘literary’ - changes the way in which they approach their study of literature.”

In this study, we chose a close reading of Act IV, Scene 6 of Shakespeare’s history play, *Henry V*, in which Henry orders,

Then every soldier kill his prisoners.

Give the word through. (OSS, 2024, Lines 2515-2516)

A post-structuralist perspective (Richter, 1994) encourages the researcher to entertain a variety of meanings from the text, while cultural criticism (Leitch, 1992; Poovey, 1990) asks whether and, if so, to what extent decisions made in the 15th century may be evaluated using modern standards of moral behavior. Post-structuralism is the theoretical foundation underlying the analyses of this study. Combining the two methods of literary research allowed us a more creative approach to our analysis and evaluation of the question as to whether there is sufficient evidence to determine the guilt or innocence of Britain’s putative hero against the charges of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Results

Shakespeare’s *Henry V*

Among Shakespeare’s total of ten history plays, two are more frequently included in an introductory course. These are *Richard III* and *Henry V*, with the former perhaps more familiar to readers, with its portrayal of Richard as a misshapen villain murdering his way to the throne. Henry, on the other hand, is seen as a high-minded warrior king rallying his “band of brothers” in a rightful

quest against a larger, more professional French enemy. Harold Bloom (1998) believes *Henry V* “will always be popular” and “for the wrong reasons” (p. 119). Of course, the point of view is decidedly English. The author was English, as were those who attended performances of the play at the old Globe Theater on the South Bank of the Thames. That perspective may be expected, as well, by the millions of scholars, critics, and students of English language and literature all over the world who read the play in the English language.

Serious research demands that one put aside one’s bias and consider the work with as much objectivity as possible. While we may continue our affection for Henry, particularly when compared to other English monarchs, we are not relieved of the burden of evaluating his behavior, either historically or as he is portrayed by Shakespeare, and that evaluation raises questions that need dispassionate examination.

The Battle of Agincourt

As Shakespeare tells it, Henry V led an invading army east across the English Channel to press his claim to the throne of France. Near the town of Agincourt in the north of France, close to the English Channel, Henry faced a larger force of French infantry and cavalry. Though outnumbered, he managed to capture a number of prisoners. On hearing a report that the French were preparing to attack, Henry faced a dilemma. If he committed men to guard the prisoners, he would have lost fighting strength to defend against the French attack. If he did not, he risked having the prisoners join the attack from his rear:

But, hark! what new alarum is this same?

The French have reinforced their scatter’d men:

Then every soldier kill his prisoners:

Give the word through. (Act IV, Scene 7)

Another theory explaining Henry’s order is based on his lust for revenge, for retribution for the French army’s killing of the boys who were guarding the English supply wagons. While the story of the killing may be true, there is sufficient doubt in the literature to exclude it from our

analysis, from conclusively attributing Henry's order to wanting to avenge the deaths of a few boys (Curry, 2015).

Just War Theory

In order for a war to be considered just, three broad conditions must be met. First, among other things, the initiation of hostilities must have a just cause and be ordered by a proper authority to pursue that cause, *jus ad bellum*. In the midst of the Hundred Years War, Henry traces his claim to the throne back through his great-grandfather, Edward III, and believes he is the rightful heir to the French monarchy. And he is, of course, the authority who initiates the invasion. Second, behavior during the war must not violate well-established rules, *jus in bello* (Lang, O'Driscoll, & Williams, 2013). The order to kill his prisoners is a violation of *jus in bello*. Henry knows this. He also knows, however, the existential threat to his army posed by the prisoners potentially joining the attack. What should he do? The third criterion, a later addition to just war theory, is that there must be mercy to the vanquished, *jus post bellum* (Brunstetter & O'Driscoll, 2018). This means that prisoners must not be killed.

Besides the moral question facing Henry, there is also a practical, i.e., pecuniary, consideration. In his analysis of the treatment of prisoners of war, Strickland (1996) notes that while prisoners may be treated harshly, "By the fourteenth century, jurists were arguing that since a prisoner was held essentially as a pledge for the price of his ransom, the captor might take reasonable measures to encourage payment" (p. 197). While a captor might kill low-born combatants, for whom no ransom could be expected, the same is not true for those of the nobility, the amount of ransom depending on the rank of the captive.

Ancient Roots of Just War Theory

In the Foreword to his *New Directions in Just War Theory*, Reiner (2018) errs when he writes, "Just war theory has a long and distinguished history that stretches back to the Christian theologians of medieval Europe" (p. vii). The error

is that the roots of just war theory may be traced much further back in time. Comments that might be reasonably connected to "the law of war," or what much later came to be called "just war theory," are clearly discernable in the writings of Plato (428/380 BCE) and Aristotle (384/322 BCE) in the fifth century BCE. Plato's *Laws* (2016/c. 360-347 BCE) and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (2012/350 BCE) discuss the ethical considerations related to warfare and justice. Although we have nothing written by Socrates (470-399 BCE), we have his dialogues, as reported by Plato. Here, too, we can see that the principles of armed conflict, the laws of war, are dealt with centuries before Augustine and more than a thousand years before Aquinas. It is not credible to believe that Henry V, well-educated in his youth, would not have known of the Greek philosophers and their views on the laws of war. Similarly, Henry must have known the writings of Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE), military commander, Roman Emperor, and Stoic philosopher, who recorded his thoughts in the second century, and later published in his *Meditations*, wrote "Do the right thing. The rest doesn't matter" (Book VI.2).

Stewart (2018) traces the origins of just war theory to Cicero, a respected statesman and philosopher of the late Roman Republic in the first century BCE. "Virtuous behavior" was a treasured value to the people of the Republic, and Cicero embraced that value in his treatment of the conduct of war, demonstrating the universally held belief that virtue is its own reward. Of course, there is always in the back of one's mind that cruelty toward the prisoners of your enemy might result in reciprocal treatment by the enemy toward those of your soldiers who are in the hands of your enemy.

Rome, with its legions constantly fighting to expand its influence, would find such commentary relevant. Cicero was a prolific writer and, with limited personal military experience, was able to articulate the ideas of statesmanship in forms that were understandable to the populace and conforming to their own views. Cicero was well aware of the kind of moral dilemma that Henry V would face more than a millennium later.

Recognizing Cicero as the structure of what we call just war theory, one may attribute an earlier, if less systematic, treatment of the subject even to Socrates and Thucydides (1972/431 BCE) in the fifth century BCE. Plato (1968/380 BCE) writes that in a dialogue between Socrates and Thrasymachus, the latter says, “I say that the just is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger” (p. 15). In his dialogue with Alcibiades, Socrates leads the latter to acknowledge that justice and decisions about war are closely linked (Syse, 2007) and linked to virtue (Syse, 2002). Thucydides (1972) says much the same thing: “...the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (p. 402). The struggle here is that which contends the forces of unconstrained nature against the limits imposed by society and can be seen in Hobbes (1651/2021) and Rousseau (1762/2014).

If Plato is acknowledged to be the progenitor of what would become just war theory, we could even make the case for traces even earlier, to Homer (1924) in the eighth century BCE. In Book 22 of the *Iliad*, Homer shows Achilles violating divine law by dishonoring the body of Hector, whom he had just defeated (400-405). It was likely Aethiopsis in *The Epic Cycle*, where we see Achilles dragging the body of Hector, whom he defeated in combat, around the walls of the city of Troy (West, 2013). One might speculate that before the invention of writing, there must have been some sort of recognition that there are limits to what is acceptable in armed conflict—or even unarmed conflict.

As to those “Christian theologians” invoked by Reiner, Langan (1984, p. 19) notes that Augustine (354-430) dealt with the dilemma of Christian theology and war before the time of medieval Europe: “St. Augustine’s just war theory involves eight principal elements:

- a) a punitive conception of war,
- b) assessment of the evil of war in terms of the moral evil of attitudes and desires,
- c) a search for authorization for the use of violence,
- d) a dualistic epistemology which gives priority to spiritual goods,

e) interpretation of evangelical norms in terms of inner attitudes,

f) passive attitude to authority and social change,

g) use of Biblical texts to legitimate participation in war, and

h) an analogical conception of peace.”

Reiner may be allowed some leeway in his assertion as to the origin of just war theory if he intends Augustine to be the originator, for it was that early Christian apologist whose “initial writings would later become the foundation of Just War Theory” (Husby, 2009, p. 4). Walzer (2015), however, takes the origins back in time, across the globe in space, and beyond moral judgments, to a place where “morality and law have no place, *Inter arma silent leges*: in time of war the law is silent” (p. 3). Walzer, nevertheless, finds a “universality of humanity’s concerns of the morality of war,” which Husby applies to Ancient Greece (p. 5).

To be clear, the principles of just war theory initially established by the Greek philosophers, and articulated by the early Christian theologians (Pugliatti, 2010, p. 185), had already been well understood for more than a thousand years when, on October 25, 1415, Henry V gave the order to kill his French prisoners of war. Therefore, this study finds that the issue of *presentism* (Barnes, 2019) is moot.

Whether the order was in revenge for the French killing the boys at the supply wagons or in contemplation of an imminent French attack, Henry must be presumed to know well the laws of war. Indeed, on hearing Henry’s order, Fluellen, a Welsh officer in Henry’s army, says,

‘Tis expressly

against the law of arms. ‘Tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can be offert, in your conscience now, is it not? (Act IV, Scene 7)

Whether in the fifteenth century or the twenty-first century, the killing of one’s prisoners is criminal, subject to the possible but rare “supreme emergency exemption” defense discussed below. We should at the outset, however, take note that the exemption applies to a nation that has been attacked.

(Fiala, 2002; Orend, 2020; Toner, 2005; Walzer, 2015). In this study, we find that Henry V was the attacker, and not one who has been victimized by aggression. In any event, the laws of war were of long standing, and they were widely known in the time of Agincourt. Killing of prisoners was explicitly prohibited legally and morally. Fluellen knew it, and Henry knew it.

Modern Foundations and Practice of Just War Theory

We find modern applications of just war theory in two locations (three if we include the Civil War Lieber Codes, (Beard, 2013), the Geneva Conventions, that codified *jus in bellum* for the modern age, and the Rome Statute of 1998, which established the International Criminal Court. Just war theory today is embraced by all members of the United Nations by ratification of the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, including the 1929 Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (ICRC, 2023). The Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War requires that “Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated.” International Humanitarian Law also defines minimum conditions of detention covering such issues as accommodation, food, clothing, hygiene, and medical care. (ICRC, 2011).

The United States Army, in implementing the Geneva Conventions, instructs its personnel that, “Prisoners of war must at all times be humanely treated” (Article 13, FM 2-22.3, Army, 2006, p. A-6). Those maintaining custody of prisoners are explicitly warned against taking any action “causing death or seriously endangering the health of a prisoner of war,” and directed that “prisoners of war must at all times be protected, particularly against acts of violence or intimidation and against insults and public curiosity.” Similarly, the Army shields other noncombatants from intentional harm and prosecutes offenders, as in the case of William Calley and his part in the 1968 My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. Some 500 innocent civilians were murdered by members of Calley’s platoon. Calley was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment, after which

President Richard Nixon, ironically, himself a military veteran and raised as a Quaker, who must have known the laws of war, inexplicably commuted the sentence (Powell, 2009; Ross-Range, 2016).

The application of just war theory is further codified by the Rome Statute (ICC, 2018). Nearly every nation (with some notable exceptions) is a signatory to the Rome Statute. The Rome Statute asserts the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) over four crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression, each of which is defined in the Statute (ICC, 2018, Articles 2-8, pp. 3-8). We may understand the ICC to be “the Geneva Conventions with teeth.” Article 77 of the Statute provides for penalties to be adjudged against offenders, up to life in prison, a fine, and forfeiture of proceeds, property and assets derived from the criminal acts (p. 38). To date, the ICC has tried 31 cases from both Africa and Serbia.

Countries that are not signatories to the Rome Statute include the United States, China, India, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Qatar, and Israel. United States President Bill Clinton did sign the treaty, but his successor, George W. Bush, himself charged as a war criminal for aggression and torture (ECCHR, 2023; Haghdoosti, 2023) revoked the agreement.

Supreme Emergency Exemption

Scholars of just war theory are not oblivious to the kind of moral dilemma faced by Henry V at Agincourt and by others before and after the fifteenth century, whether on the battlefield or at the seat of government (Cook, 2007; Lund, 2011; Reiner, 2017 & 2018; Statman, 2006; Toner, 2005; and Walzer, 2015). Are there some circumstances that override the rules of war? Can a leader be morally justified in such circumstances, knowing the rules, as Henry V must have known when he ordered the killing of noncombatants such as civilians and prisoners of war? The consensus answers in the affirmative. There must be assumed, however, some kind of defense for those accused of aggression, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. At the outset, we assert *a priori* that there cannot ever be, in any set of circumstances, a moral

justification for the fourth of such offenses, namely, genocide.

The dilemma noted here, sometimes called “the back-against-the-wall argument,” is captured by Michael Walzer (2015) in Chapter 16, “Supreme Emergency,” in which he articulates an “exemption” to the principles of *jus in bellum*, a defense of the violations of well understood and well-documented prohibitions of certain conduct in war based on the “imminence of the danger” and its “nature” (p. 251).

Walzer devotes an entire chapter to the concept of “Supreme Emergency” (pp. 250-267). He traces the phrase to Winston Churchill’s “predicament” in 1939. (See also Orend, 2020, and Toner, 2005.) Cook contends that leaders, while they may be “under extreme pressure,” are not granted “*moral permission* to violate the *jus in bello* rules” (p.138). Lund contends that “allowing the intentional targeting of noncombatants erodes the already thin line between just war and murder” (p. 655); this would, by definition, cover all *hors de combat*, those not, or are no longer, participating in active hostilities, including prisoners of war. Chan (2012) tries to bridge the gap between defenders and critics of Walzer, agreeing with the pacifists in rejecting war *in toto* but accepting that “war can be legitimately fought provided that moral constraints that protect noncombatants are respected “ (p. 273).

Whether one grants Henry V the cloak of morality depends on the orientation of the judges. Those who accept that he ordered the mass killing of his French prisoners out of necessity, employing the supreme emergency exemption, follow Aristotelian teleology, along with the realpolitik masters Machiavelli (1532/2022) and Hobbes (1651/2021): the ends justify the means. Those who reject that rationale for granting the mantle of morality, while acknowledging a possible existential threat to the English army, more closely align with Kantian deontology, i.e., right reasoning; do the right thing for the morally right reason. In short, where you stand depends on where you sit. In the end, however, there is no evidence in Shakespeare or in historical accounts that Henry

claimed the defense of supreme emergency exemption during or after the battle of Agincourt (Orend, 2020; Toner, 2005).

Chivalry

Henry’s order to kill his prisoners violated not only thousands of years of the laws of war but also violated the feudal codes of chivalry. Chivalry was the result of the evolution of the knight from a heavily armed horse-mounted brute who abused his power to dominate the vulnerable, to a guardian of the principles of humanity following a code of conduct that demanded fealty to one’s liege, devotion to the church, generosity toward others, and, notably, gallantry toward women (Kaeuper & Kennedy, 1996, pp.48-64; Saul, 2011, pp. 7-20). We find that chivalry was born in response to excesses by heavily armed bullies and died when its principles could not adjust to changing conditions on the battlefield.

Chivalry in the Time of Henry V

The tradition of chivalry and the chivalric code predates the arrival of those principles in England, which may reliably traced to October 1066, when William, the Duke of Normandy, crossed the English Channel with his knights, defeated the defenders led by Harold Godwinson, and occupied the land, and would be from that time on be known as William the Conqueror. Before the Norman Conquest, there is no historical evidence of fighting by mounted knights in England (Saul, 2011, p. 7).

By the time of the invasion of France by Henry V in the early fifteenth century, customs embodied in the various codes of chivalry had been well-established for more than three hundred years. As recently as the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer (2006/1476), in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, had described the brave, noble, and modest Knight in positive terms, but also showed, in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, an instance of a young knight committing an atrocity against a young female. The traditions of chivalry of which Henry was well aware, had made important contributions to the institutions of British society.

The End of Chivalry

It is the contention of this study that chivalry, as it had been understood for centuries, died on the muddy fields of Agincourt in October 1415, when the chivalric French nobles lay dead in their thousands at the hands of archers made up of common men, men who would be part of Henry's "band of brothers." Chivalry demanded hand-to-hand combat, face-to-face, at close quarters, by mounted knights of equal nobility and equal prowess. Sharpened spikes of the English front lines, however, driven into the ground, impaled the charging horses, throwing their heavily armored riders into the mud. Common tradesmen were not bound by the codes of chivalry. They had neither the money to buy horses or armor nor the training required of one who aspired to the title and perquisites of a knight. As to Henry's pledge,

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,

This day shall gentle his condition (Act IV,
Scene 3)

Shakespeare tells us nothing in this play, nor can we find definitively in any other place, whether the veterans of Agincourt had their condition "gentled" in a way that Henry promised, i.e., raised in status. Neither do we find much in the scholarly literature on the matter. We may, in the absence of much historical evidence, however, be inclined to agree with Kipling's "Tommy," that veterans returning from foreign campaigns are treated badly, even with contempt (Kipling, 2011, pp. 118-119):

You talk o' better food for us, an' schools, an' fires, an' all:

We'll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.

Don't mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face

The Widow's Uniform is not the soldier-man's disgrace.

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"

But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot;

An' it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' anything you please;

An' Tommy ain't a bloomin' fool—you bet that Tommy sees!

While soldiers, sailors, and marines returning to the United States after World War II were treated as heroes, Vietnam veterans were labeled baby killers, drug addicts, warmongers, and psychos. It was a common scene for returning soldiers to be accosted at airports by protesters carrying signs with anti-war slogans (Ciampaglia, 2019).

The tactics and traditions of Norman chivalry flourished for three-and-a-half centuries in England. When Henry V reversed the direction of the invasion, however, crossing east across the Channel to assert his claim to the throne of France, he left those ideas behind. It would not be armor-clad mounted nobles who would win the Battle of Agincourt, but a "band of brothers," mostly commoners, armed with the longbow, standing off some two hundred yards firing the most devastating volleys of arrows into the French assaults who would draw the curtain on chivalry (Saul, p. 355).

Should the date of October 1415 and the Battle of Agincourt be disputed as the end of chivalry, then one may certainly hear the death knell for chivalry half of a millennium later, on August 14, 1914, the beginning of the end of knights riding their steeds to battle in "the war to end all war." The first date is when the French knights, with all the chivalric traditions and trappings, were vanquished by the tradesmen and merchants of England. As the "chivalry" derives from knights fighting on horseback (Saul, 2011, p. 7) those French nobles in their shining armor died in the last gasp of that tradition.

But if mounted warriors would continue post-Agincourt, the tradition would, in the early twentieth century, run head-on into the barbed wire, machine guns, tanks, and trenches of the First World War, the Great War. "The greater good of the many took precedence over pursuit of individual knightly

self-interest” and “potentially ruinous loss of income” (Saul, p. 357)

Vestiges of Chivalry

Winston Churchill, in his tribute to the notably chivalrous Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, said, “In the somber wars of modern democracy, chivalry finds no place.” Wood (2017), writes, “some aspects the Allied propaganda about Rommel—that he was a fair fighter, that he respected the ideals of chivalry when other Germans didn’t—were generally true.”

The United States Military Academy at West Point has its Cadet Honor Code: “I will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate among us those who do” (Taylor, 1983). Cadets who violate the Code are punished, even to the extent of dismissal from the Academy (Hansen, 1985). Similarly, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA, 2020) have a Scout Oath that is reminiscent of the medieval Code of Chivalry:

On my honor, I will do my best
To do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout Law;
To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.

The Scout Oath is supplemented by the twelve elements of the Scout Law: A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent. Even a cursory look at these elements will remind the reader of the knight’s code of chivalric behavior.

Discussion

It is a “basic principle [that] the law of nations is a principle of equality,” (Rawls, 1999, p. 332). The evidence suggests that Shakespeare shaped the conversation about the law of nations and just war theory and the involvement of Henry V in bringing about the end of medieval chivalry. One is left to decide whether Henry’s decision to kill his prisoners may be justified by the supreme emergency exemption or whether it was an act of

revenge for the French attack on his supply wagons and the boys at those wagons. Shakespeare’s lines are not dispositive.

In the end, what we find is that the word “chivalry” has lost its original meaning, and that the loss has led to a distortion of the history of the Battle of Agincourt, as well as the lessons we might otherwise learn from the episode. How we teach and learn those lessons is no trivial matter. Shakespeare shows us one Henry, while history and critical thinking show us a more nuanced situation, one in which Henry is faced with the kind of moral dilemma that may confront each of us at some time in our lives.

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