

**“Political assassination and waging war are presented by  
Shakespeare as morally justifiable.”**

**In view of this statement, and using your understanding of the  
contexts in which these plays were written, compare and contrast  
the ways in which Shakespeare dramatically presents the moral  
justification for bloodshed in “Henry V” and “Julius Caesar”.**

Throughout *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare presents his view on bloodshed, and whether it is justifiable. In *Henry V*, Shakespeare presents Henry’s moral decision to invade France. In *Julius Caesar*, the major decision is Brutus’ to assassinate Caesar. In both plays, Shakespeare presents a moral message with the decision. He uses them to display his attitude to war to the Elizabethan public. While the plays were written in 1599, England was at war with Ireland. Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, was a leading public figure, although out of favour with Elizabeth I (Shapiro, 2005). The Elizabethan audiences would have known of this political nightmare while they watched the plays. Bloodshed is a key theme in both productions. Brutus believes that he is participating in the assassination for Rome’s benefit. However, Antony’s response causes a civil war to break out, leading the audience to consider whether this situation could arise in England, particularly since there had recently been assassination attempts on Elizabeth (ibid.). But, Henry wages war against France and returns victorious. The audience would have noticed Henry’s likeness to Devereux as well as Elizabeth I. Shakespeare also presents a darker side to the play: the war is not absolutely moral.

The most noticeable way that Shakespeare expresses a political opinion on bloodshed is the effects of the two major morally questionable decisions: to kill Caesar and to go to war. Whereas in *Henry V*, the outcome of the war is favourable to the English audience, demonstrated by Exeter’s exclamation “’tis wonderful!” (IV:viii, 111), the outcome of Brutus’s decision to kill Caesar is worse, eventually ending in Brutus’ and Cassius’ suicides, after losing the war. “I owe mo tears/To this dead man than you shall see me pay” (V:iii, 101) depicts Brutus’ loss and grief, presenting a warning against bloodshed by showing its consequences. However, in *Henry V* Shakespeare is bound by censorship and jingoism to present England as superior and powerful.

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Where *Julius Caesar* is a moral admonition, *Henry V* is a nationalistic, morale raising play. For that reason McEvoy says “it really can inspire”. That is why Olivier’s film version was “dedicated to the assault troops who were themselves about to cross the channel to France as welcome liberators” (2004: 38). It is clear why this was done: the play is full of patriotism, such as “mark then abounding valour in our English,” (IV:iii, 104), and the English win against all odds. This contrast in moral message is because of the setting of the plays: *Henry V* was set in England and to appeal to the English audience, Shakespeare had to show English greatness. *Julius Caesar* is set in Rome, so his message is unaffected by audience bias. However, in *Henry V*, the final Chorus explains that the war was futile, since Henry VI lost France anyway. Shakespeare includes this to show that war is pointless. This structural device allows the course of history to present the argument, so no censorship is breached. However, Shakespeare’s message that bloodshed is wrong is presented more strongly in *Julius Caesar*, so is more effective. At the end, Shakespeare suggests that Octavius might be tyrannical, so again bloodshed led to great evil. He structures the plays to highlight the dangers of war, to present war as evil.

Shakespeare’s presentation of class is particularly relevant to this issue. After Henry carefully justifies the war, ensuring that everybody is convinced that it is fought on sound principles, Nym depicts the commoners’ attitude to war, “it [mine iron] will toast cheese, and it will endure cold as another man’s sword will” (II:i, 7), the commoners care more for their physiological needs than capturing France, although their lives are the ones at risk. However, in *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare shows the fickleness of the Plebeians; they agree with whatever the orator has just told them. Plebeian 4 says “give him a statue with his ancestors” (III:ii, 49) after Brutus’ speech, but after Antony’s speech says “they were traitors: ‘honourable men’?” (III:ii, 153). Shakespeare is demonstrating that anything is justifiable to commoners, through the use of rhetoric; contrasting with his presentation of commoners in *Henry V* as stubborn and disagreeing with the monarch. “He [Pistol] shows the sordid reality of the invasion which is both effaced and justified by the lasting glamour of Henry’s self-presentation” (ibid.). McEvoy’s point is that the peasants are used to show the actuality of war, so the audience can see Henry’s distance, contrasting with the use of the Plebeians. However, arguably, the commoners are only used to highlight the theme of masculine self-interest throughout the play, also subtly in the court. It is more likely that Shakespeare structures the play with alternating scenes between the court and

the commoners to present the range of opinions on the war, just as there would have been many on the Irish war, or the Iraq war today. Shakespeare is subtly showing that war is not always good. The commoners should not agree with war simply because their leader, Queen Elizabeth, believes it is just.

Pistol and company are also used by Shakespeare to present the issue of loyalty. Similarly, in *Julius Caesar* loyalty is a key theme and relevant to the justification of bloodshed: Brutus and Caesar were close friends. Antony says "Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel" (III:ii, 180) which shows Brutus' lack of loyalty to Caesar. However, Brutus killed Caesar for the state's benefit, lest Caesar be tyrannical. Debatably, the murder was just, as Brutus put Rome before Caesar. The issue of loyalty is raised differently in *Henry V*. Henry's selfish war, for his own gain, results in the death of two of his friends, soon after the death of Falstaff: "the King has killed his heart" (III:i, 84). Again, the leader's loyalty to the state and selfishness result in the death of their friends. The Elizabethan audience would have recognised that Elizabeth was weaker: when Essex scorned Elizabeth; she boxed his ears, but could have had him killed (Shapiro, 2005). The audiences could have taken the perspective of either play: Elizabeth should have made an example, as Henry did, leading to a more disciplined army; or she was right, since killing friends can have consequences, shown in *Julius Caesar*. Branagh's 1989 film shows Henry watching Bardolph, his old friend, be hung. This interpretation emphasises more dramatically Henry putting his country above his friends.

Conspicuously, in both *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare presents a flawed justification for bloodshed. Henry always ensures that there is someone else to blame for the war. "Justly and religiously unfold/ Why the Salic law that they have in France" (I:ii, 9) proves that Henry expresses a selfish desire for political safety, unwilling to put himself in danger. It also demonstrates Henry seeking religious justification for the war. The people would have seen the war as morally just if supported by the Church, but ironically the Church is also corrupt: they too use the war for selfish gain. Similarly, Henry attempts to blame the war on France by suggesting that they initiated it, and he is simply retaliating. He reverses the Dauphin's ridicule with the tennis balls, and cleverly says "turned his balls to gun-stones" (I:ii, 183), demonstrating Shakespeare's use of language to make Henry seem a great leader. Likewise, Brutus' soliloquy attempts to justify Caesar's death, but "Brutus is deceiving himself. He confesses that he has 'no personal cause' to fear Caesar" and "Brutus resorts to generalisation" (Gill, 2001) which make it

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clear that Brutus only kills Caesar on the chance that he might otherwise turn tyrannical. However, Shakespeare may have intended the audience to notice Brutus' loyalty to Rome. He kills Caesar to protect Rome from tyranny, and his actions could be interpreted as selfless and heroic. Shakespeare's dramatic use of a soliloquy allows Brutus to reveal his innermost, private thoughts. As justification, Shakespeare presents an image of a snake, representing Caesar, indicating that Brutus sees Caesar as evil. Another image is the ladder, representing power, used to show that Caesar could become tyrannical. The audience would notice the flaw in this assertion: many kings use their power wisely and well. The Elizabethan audience believed that kings were God's representatives on Earth, so are always faultless. This is part of the Divine Right of Kings. Shakespeare makes the lack of justification much more obvious in *Henry V*: we see the bishops plotting before hand.

However, the reasons for these flawed justifications are the same: Brutus and Henry are both predisposed to bloodshed. Cassius has already persuaded Brutus to kill Caesar. Earlier on in the play, Cassius says "three parts of him/ Is ours already" (I:iii, 154) which demonstrates that Cassius has already almost persuaded Brutus to join the conspiracy. Brutus' soliloquy merely attempts to justify the assassination. Henry wants to go to war for his own selfish desire to rule France. Although Henry seeks the Church's approval of the war, he is only doing so for his public image. Like Caesar, Henry must act selflessly and piously in public, but privately they both seek power. Johnston asks "if Henry is as pious as he likes to appear, demanding a moral justification for going to war ... then why does he go to war in the first place?" (2000). Henry is acting piously, for example "take it, God./ For it is none but Thine!" (IV:viii, 110), because he wants the people's empathy. He goes to war because he simply wants power, like Caesar, Brutus and Elizabeth, who invades Ireland simply because she wants to rule it and add it to her dominion. Shakespeare presents this justification as flawed, since the decision is already made, and the Elizabethan audience could infer his disapproval of the Irish war.

This leads on to the means by which Brutus and Henry are persuaded to go to war. Henry essentially goes to war on a technicality: the Salic lands lie "between the floods of Sala and of Elbe" (I:ii, 45), and arguably Canterbury's speech is so long and tedious to show the audience that Henry just needs any excuse to declare war. Henry also likes to be flattered: Ely says "with your puissant arm renew your feats" (I:ii, 116) which gratifies the king so he favours the Church's proposal. The discussion at this point is sycophantic and there is a semantic field of

power and courage, which flatter Henry. Similarly, Brutus is persuaded through flattery, and both leaders are persuaded through their ancestry. Cassius tells Brutus "There was a Brutus once who would have brooked/ Th'eternal devil to keep his state in Rome/ As easily as king" (I.ii, 159) which shows that the leaders are persuaded through their ancestral pride. They feel a need to live up to the feats of the predecessors. Thompson argues that "Cassius' initial approach, the attack on Caesar as an individual, is largely ineffective. Brutus is evidently too high-minded to succumb to jealousy. Cassius moves on to appeal to family pride" (1992), reinforcing that Brutus, like Henry, is affected by his ancestral honour. However, Cassius' attack on Caesar shows the audience that Cassius disapproves of Caesar, allowing him to lead on to persuading Brutus. Debatably, Brutus succumbs to this more than Henry, because Henry was more predisposed to war in the first place. Where Brutus was persuaded to assassinate Caesar, Henry was merely seeking an excuse to invade France.

To conclude, it is clear throughout both plays that Shakespeare presents bloodshed as wrong, and unjustifiable. However, in *Henry V*, Shakespeare is bound by censorship to present Henry and England as moral, since they represented Elizabeth and her England. This limited Shakespeare in his ability to criticise bloodshed. By setting *Julius Caesar* in barbaric Rome, he could insinuate warnings about bloodshed. For this reason, the presentation is more conspicuous in *Julius Caesar*; nevertheless there are many similar implications in *Henry V*. All of these were relevant to England at the time, particularly to Ireland and Devereux: it could be drawn that Shakespeare was attempting to demonstrate that the war in Ireland would only lead to greater evil. Shakespeare avoided contravention of the censorship by superficially presenting *Henry V* as patriotic, by showing English victory. Shakespeare shows to the utmost possible that political assassination and waging war are morally unjustifiable.

Cumulative word count: 1999 ✓

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