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Robert Fisk on Shakespeare and war

*Shakespeare could have been writing about Iraq or Afghanistan, his scenes of battle were so prescient. Robert Fisk dissects the Bard's attitude to conflict - and describes how relevant he has found it to be today*

Poor old Bardolph. The common soldier, the Poor Bloody Infantry, the GI Joe of Agincourt, survives Henry IV, only to end up on the end of a rope after he's avoided filling up the breach at Harfleur with his corpse. Henry V is his undoing - in every sense of the word - when he robs a French church. He must be executed, hanged, "pour encourager les autres". "Bardolph," laments his friend Pistol to Fluellen, "a soldier firm and sound of heart, /...hanged must a' be /A damned death!"

"Let gallows gape for dog, let man go free, / And let not hemp his wind-pipe suffocate: / But Exeter hath given the doom of death... / Therefore go speak, the duke will hear thy voice; / And let not Bardolph's vital thread be cut... / Speak, captain, for his life..."

How many such military executions have been recorded in the past 30 years of Middle East history? For theft, for murder, for desertion, for treachery, for a momentary lapse of discipline. Captain Fluellen pleads the profoundly ugly Bardolph's cause - not with great enthusiasm, it has to be said - to Henry himself.

"I / think the duke hath lost never a man, but one that / is like to be executed for robbing a church, one / Bardolph, if your majesty know the man: his face is / all bubkules and whelks, and knobs, and flames o' / fire, and his lips blow at his nose..."

But the priggish Henry, a friend of Bardolph in his princely, drinking days (shades of another, later Prince Harry), will have none of it:

"We would have all such offenders so cut off: and we / give express charge that in our marches through the / country there be nothing compelled from the / villages; nothing taken but paid for; none of the / French upbraided or abused in disdainful language..."

In France, Eisenhower shot post-D-Day rapists in the US army. The SS hanged their deserters even as Berlin fell. I have my notes of a meeting with Fathi Daoud Mouffak, one of Saddam Hussein's military cameramen during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, a sensitive man, a mere Pistol in the great retreat around Basra where a reservist was accused of desertion by an officer of the Iraqi "Popular Army". He was a very young man, Mouffak was to recall:

"And the reporter from Jumhuriya newspaper tried to save him. He said to the commander: 'This is an Iraqi citizen. He should not die.' But the commander said: 'This is none of your business - stay out of this.' And so it was the young man's fate to be shot by a firing squad... before he was executed, he said he was the father of four children. And he begged to live. 'Who will look after my wife and my children?' he asked. 'I am a Muslim. Please think of Allah - for Saddam, for God, please help me... I am not a conscript, I am a reservist. I did not run away from the battle - my battalion was destroyed.' But the commander shot him personally - in
the head and in the chest."

My own father, 2nd Lieutenant Bill Fisk of the 12th Battalion, the King's Liverpool Regiment, a soldier of the 1914-18 war, was ordered to command a firing party, to execute a 19-year old Australian soldier, Gunner Frank Wills of the Royal Field Artillery, who had murdered a military policeman in Paris. Bill refused to carry out this instruction, only to be put on a court martial charge for refusing to obey an order. Someone else dispatched Bill Fisk's Bardolph. "I ask the Court to take into consideration my youth and to give me a chance of leading an upright and straightforward life in the future," Wills wrote in his miserable plea for mercy. British officers turned it down, arguing that an example should be made of Wills to prevent further indiscriminate. The war had long been over when he was shot at dawn at Le Havre. Bill served in the Third Battle of the Somme in 1918 and I never pass the moment when Shakespeare's French king asks if Henry's army "hath passed the river Somme" without drawing in my breath. Did some faint moment of Renaissance prescience touch the dramatist in 1599?

I am still to be convinced that Shakespeare saw war in service in the army of Elizabeth. "Say'st thou me so?" Pistol asks of a cringing French prisoner who does not speak English. "Come hither, boy, ask me this slave in French / What is his name." I heard an almost identical quotation in Baghdad, shorn of its 16th-century English, when a US Marine confronted an Iraqi soldier-demonstrator in 2003. "Shut the fuck up," he screamed at the Iraqi. Then he turned to his translator. "What the fuck's he saying?" At the siege of Harfleur, the soldier Boy wishes he was far from battle - "Would I were in an alehouse in London! I would give / all my fame for a pot of ale, and safety" - and Henry's walk through his camp in disguise on the eve of Agincourt evokes some truly modern reflections on battle. The soldier Bates suggests to him that if the king had come on his own to Agincourt, he would be safely ransomed "and a many poor men's lives saved."

The equally distressed soldier Williams argues that if the English cause is doubtful: "...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'; 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..."

This bloody accounting would be familiar to any combat soldier, but Shakespeare could have heard these stories from the English who had been fighting on the Continent in the 16th century. I've seen those chopped-off legs and arms and heads on the battlefields of the Middle East, in southern Iraq in 1991 when the eviscerated corpses of Iraqi soldiers and refugee women and children were lying across the desert, their limbs afterwards torn apart by ravenous dogs. And I've talked to Serb soldiers who fought Bosnian Muslims in the battle for the Bihac pocket, men who were so short of water that they drank their own urine.

Similarly, Shakespeare's censorious Caesar Augustus contemplates Antony's pre-Cleopatran courage: "...When thou once / Wast beaten from Modena, / ...at thy heel / Did famine follow, whom thou fought'st against / ...with patience more / Than savages could suffer: thou didst drink / The stale of horses and the gilded puddle / Which beasts would cough at..."

Yet Wilfred Owen's poetry on the "pity of war" - his description, say, of the gassed soldier coughing his life away, the blood gargling "from the froth-corrupted lungs" - has much greater immediacy.

True, death was ever present in the life of any Tudor man or woman; the Plague that sometimes closed down the Globe Theatre, the hecatomb of child mortality, the overflowing, pestilent graveyards, united all mankind in the proximity of death. Understand death and you understand war, which is primarily about the extinction of human life rather than victory or defeat. And despite constant repetition, Hamlet's soliloquy over poor Yorick's skull remains a deeply disturbing contemplation of death:

"My gorge rises at / it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know / not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your / gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment / that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one / now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chappell'n?"

And here is Omar Khayyam's contemplation of a king's skull at Tus - near the modern-day Iranian city of Mashad - written more than 400 years before * * Shakespeare's Hamlet stood in the churchyard at Elsinore:

"I saw a bird alighted on the city walls of Tus / Grasping in its claws Kaika'us's head: / It was saying to that head, 'Shame! Shame! / Where now the sound of the bells and the boom of the drum?"
The swiftness with which disease struck the living in previous centuries was truly murderous. And I have my own testimony at how quickly violent death can approach. Assaulted by a crowd of Afghans in a Pakistani border village in 2001 - their families had just been slaughtered in an American B-52 air raid on Kandahar - an ever-growing crowd of young men were banging stones on to my head, smashing my glasses into my face, cutting my skin open until I could smell my own blood. And, just for a moment, I caught sight of myself in the laminated side of a parked bus. I was crimson with blood, my face was bright red with the stuff and it was slopping down my shirt and on to my bag and my trousers and shoes; I was all gore from head to foot.

And I distinctly remember, at that very moment - I suppose it was a subconscious attempt to give meaning to my own self-disgust - the fearful ravings of the insane Lady Macbeth as she contemplates the stabbing of King Duncan: "...who would have thought the old man / to have had so much blood in him?"

Shakespeare would certainly have witnessed pain and suffering in daily London life. Executions were in public, not filmed secretly on mobile telephones. But who cannot contemplate Saddam's hanging - the old monster showing nobility as his Shi'ite executioners tell him he is going "to hell" - without remembering "that most disloyal traitor", the condemned Thane of Cawdor in Macbeth, of whom Malcolm was to remark that "nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it." Indeed, Saddam's last response to his tormentors - "to the hell that is Iraq?" - was truly Shakespeareean.

How eerily does Saddam's shade haunt our modern reading of Shakespeare. "Hang those that talk of fear!" must have echoed through many a Saddamite palace, where "mouth-honour" had long ago become the custom, where - as the casualties grew through the long years of his eight-year conflict with Iran - a Ba'athist leader might be excused the Macbethian thought that he was "in blood / Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er". The Iraqi dictator tried to draw loose inspiration from the Epic of Gilgamesh in his own feeble literary endeavours, an infantile novel which - if David Damrosch is right - was the work of an Iraqi writer subsequently murdered by Saddam. Perhaps Auden best captures the nature of the beast:

"Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after, / And the poetry he invented was easy to understand; / He knew human folly like the back of his hand, / And was greatly interested in armies and fleets..."

In an age when we are supposed to believe in the "War on Terror", we may quarry our way through Shakespeare's folios in search of Osama bin Laden and George W Bush with all the enthusiasm of the mass murderer who prows through Christian and Islamic scriptures in search of excuses for ethnic cleansing. Indeed, smiting the Hittites, Canaanites and Jebusites is not much different from smiting the Bosnians or the Rwandans or the Arabs or, indeed, the modern-day Israelis. And it's not difficult to find a parallel with Bush's disasters in Afghanistan and Iraq - and his apparent desire to erase these defeats with yet a new military adventure in Iran - in Henry IV's deathbed advice to his son, the future Henry V:

"...Therefore, my Harry, / Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out / May waste the memory of the former days."

The wasteland and anarchy of Iraq in the aftermath of our illegal 2003 invasion is reflected in so many of Shakespeare's plays that one can move effortlessly between the tragedies and the histories to read of present-day civil war Baghdad. Here's the father, for example, on discovering that he has killed his own child in Henry VI, Part III:

"O, pity, God, this miserable age! / What stratagems, how fell, how butcherly, / Erroneous, mutinous and unnatural, / This deadly quarrel daily doth beget!"

Our treachery towards the Shi'ites and Kurds of Iraq in 1991 - when we encouraged them to rise up against Saddam and then allowed the butcher of Baghdad to destroy them - was set against the genuine cries for freedom that those doomed people uttered in the days before their betrayal. "...waving our red weapons o'er our heads," as Brutus cried seconds after Julius Caesar's murder, "Let's all cry, 'Peace, freedom, and liberty'."

My own experience of war has changed my feelings towards many of Shakespeare's characters. The good guys in Shakespeare's plays have become ever less attractive, ever more portentous, ever more sinister as the years go by. Henry V seems more than ever a butcher. "Now, herald, are the dead number'd?" he asks.

"This note doth tell me of ten thousand French / That in the field lie slain: of princes, in this number, / And
nobles bearing banners, there lie dead / One hundred twenty six: added to these / Of knights, esquires, and
gallant gentlemen, / Eight thousand and four hundred..."

Henry is doing "body counts". When the herald presents another list - this time of the English dead, Henry reads off the names of Edward, Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk, Sir Richard Kikely, Davy Gam, Esquire: "None else of name: and, of all other men, / but five and twenty... O God, thy arm was here... / Was ever known so great and little loss, / On one part and on th'other?"

This is pure Gulf War Part One, when General Norman Schwarzkopf was gloating at the disparate casualty figures - while claiming, of course, that he was "not in the business of body counts" - while General Peter de la Billière was telling Britons to celebrate victory by ringing their church bells.

Shakespeare can still be used to remind ourselves of an earlier, "safer" (if nonexistent) world, a reassurance of our own ultimate survival. It was not by chance that Olivier's Henry V was filmed during the Second World War. The Bastard's final promise in King John is simple enough:

"Come the three corners of the world in arms, / And we shall shock them: nought shall make us rue, / If England to itself do rest but true."

But the true believers - the Osamas and Bushes - probably lie outside the history plays. The mad King Lear - betrayed by two of his daughters just as bin Laden felt he was betrayed by the Saudi royal family when they rejected his offer to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation without American military assistance - shouts that he will:

"...do such things, / What they are yet, I know not, but they shall be / The terrors of the earth!"

Lear, of course, was written in the immediate aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, a "terrorist" conspiracy with potential September 11 consequences. Similarly, the saintly Prospero in The Tempest contains both the self-righteousness and ruthlessness of bin Laden and the covert racism of Bush. When he sends Ariel to wreck the usurping King Alonso's ship on his island, the airy spirit returns with an account of his success which - despite his subsequent saving of lives - is of near-Twin Towers dimensions:

"Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin, / I flam'd amazement, sometime I'd divide / And burn in many places... / Not a soul / But felt a fever of the mad, and play'd / Some tricks of desperation; all but mariners / Plung'd in the foaming brine, and quit the vessel; / Then all afire with me the King's son Ferdinand / With hair up-staring (then like reeds, not hair) / Was the first man that leap'd; cried Hell is empty, / And all the devils are here."

In almost the same year, John Donne was using equally terrifying imagery, of a "fired ship" from which "by no way / But drowning, could be rescued from the flame, / Some men leap'd forth..."

Prospero's cruelty towards Caliban becomes more frightening each time I read of it, not least because The Tempest is one of four Shakespeare plays in which Muslims appear and because Caliban is himself an Arab, born of an Algerian mother.

"This damned Witch Sycorax / For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible / To enter human hearing, from Argier / Thou know'st was banish'd..." Prospero tells us. "This blue-ey'd hag, was hither brought with child... / A freckl'd whelp, hag-born... not honour'd with / A human shape."

Caliban is the "terrorist" on the island, first innocently nurtured by Prospero and then condemned to slavery after trying to rape Prospero's daughter, the colonial slave who turns against the fruits of civilisation that were offered him.

"You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you / For learning me your language."

Yet Caliban must "obey" Prospero because "his art is of such power". Prospero may not have F-18s or bunker-busters, but Caliban is able to play out a familiar Western narrative; he teams up with the bad guys, offering his help to Trinculo - "I'll show you the best springs; I'll pluck thee berries; / I'll fish for thee..." - making the essential linkage between evil and terror that Bush vainly tried to claim between al-Qa'ida and
Saddam. Caliban is an animal, unworthy of pity, not honoured with a "human shape". Compare this with a recent article in the newspaper USA Today, in which a former American military officer, Ralph Peters - arguing that Washington should withdraw from Iraq because its people are no longer worthy of our Western sacrifice - refers to "the comprehensive inability of the Arab world to progress in any sphere of organised human endeavour". Prospero, of course, prevails and Caliban survives to grovel to his colonial master:

"How fine my master is! I am afraid / He will chastise me / ...I'll be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace..." The war of terror has been won!

Shakespeare lived at a time when the largely Muslim Ottoman empire - then at its zenith of power - remained an existential if not a real threat for Europeans. The history plays are replete with these fears, albeit that they are also a product of propaganda on behalf of Elizabeth and, later, James. In Henry IV: Part I, the king is to set out on the Crusades:

"As far as to the sepulchre of Christ... / Forthwith a power of English shall we levy, / Whose arms were moulded in their mothers' womb / To chase these pagans in those holy fields / Over whose acres walked those blessed feet."

Rhetoric is no one's prerogative - compare King Henry V's pre-Agincourt speech with Saddam's prelude to the "Mother of All Battles" where Prospero-like purity is espoused for the Arab "side". This is Saddam: "Standing at one side of this confrontation are peoples and sincere leaders and rulers, and on the other are those who stole the rights of God and the tyrants who were renounced by God after they renounced all that was right, honourable, decent and solemn and strayed from the path of God until... they became obsessed by the devil from head to toe."

Similar sentiments are espoused by Tamberlaine in Marlowe's play. Tamberlaine is the archetypal Muslim conqueror, the "scourge of God" who found it passing brave to be a king, and ride in triumph through Persepolis.

But Othello remains the most obvious, tragic narrative of our Middle Eastern fears. He is a Muslim in the service of Venice - close neighbour to the Ottoman empire - and is sent to Cyprus to battle the Turkish fleet. He is a mercenary whose self-hatred contaminates the play and eventually leads to his own death. Racially abused by both Iago and Roderigo, he lives in a world where there are men whose heads supposedly hang beneath their shoulders, where he is black - most Arabs are not black, although Olivier faithfully followed this notion - and where, just before killing himself, he refers to his terrible stabbing of Desdemona as the work of a "base Indian" who:

"...threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe, of one whose subdued eyes, / ...Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees / ...Set you down this; / And say besides, that in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduced the state, / I took by the throat the circumcised dog / And smote him, thus."

That, I fear, is the dagger that we now feel in all our hearts.

Robert Fisk will be in conversation with Joan Bakewell and Tim Pigott-Smith for the Royal Shakespeare Company on 'Shakespeare and War' at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon on Sunday at 1pm. His latest book 'The Great War for Civilisation: the Conquest of the Middle East' is published by Fourth Estate/HarperCollins

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