

Stealing Soldiers' Hearts: Appropriating *Henry V* and Marching *Shakespeare's Boys* off to The Great War

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Abstract

This essay examines a Memorial Stained Glass Window from World War I that depicts Shakespeare's 'Henry V at Prayer' before the battle of Agincourt. Dedicated to fallen brothers from the King Edward VI Boys Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon, the window's legend reads: 'O God of Battles Steel My Soldiers' Hearts' – reflecting a belief that Henry V was a valiant warrior-king who inspired his English soldiers to defeat France in 1415. In the aftermath of World War I, scholars began to question this patriotic portrayal of Henry V seen in 'abridged' performances of Shakespeare's play. By comparing the myths embedded in this war memorial image of Henry with his entire 'O God of Battles' prayer, this essay intends to unmask Henry's character and reveal the dark complexity hidden in one of Shakespeare's most dangerous kings.



Figure 1. The Boys of King Edward VI School in 'Henry V', 1913 Shakespeare Festival, Stratford-upon-Avon. Used by permission, King Edward VI School Archives.

In 1913, boys from King Edward VI School (est. 1295) in Stratford-upon-Avon received a rare invitation to perform *Henry V* at the town's Annual Shakespeare Festival. Celebrated Shakespearean actor Frank Benson was proud to include boys from the school where William Shakespeare (1564-1616) had attended.¹ Inspired by Benson's past theatrical presentations of *Henry V*, the boys rehearsed for months and delivered a production of spectacular pageantry at the Memorial Shakespeare Theatre. The *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald* lauded their performance, claiming 'our boys have scored a triumph'.² A professional movie crew later made a silent film with subtitles of their performance, allowing the boys to see themselves in *Henry V* at Stratford's Picture House theatre.³ After playing soldiers on stage and screen, many of this 'band of brothers' left for France

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 25.

² Richard Pearson, *The Boys of Shakespeare's School in the First World War* (Stroud: The History Press, 2010), p. 17.

³ Pearson, p. 17.

the following year to actually fight in World War One. One hundred and eighty-one 'Old Boys' from King Edward VI School eventually served in France, Belgium, Mesopotamia, and Batoum.⁴ Thirty-two lost their lives, including seven from the *Henry V* production. Although *Henry V* had been considered Shakespeare's most patriotic English play for over three centuries, disillusioned scholars in post-war Britain began to see *Henry V* as a darker, more complex anti-war satire. Critics argued that 'abridged productions' distorted Shakespeare's subversive attack on imperialism, military rhetoric, and the dangers of charismatic leaders. People traumatised by horror and loss in the war, however, preferred to hold onto the heroic image of Henry V. This perception is frozen in a war memorial stained glass window – 'Henry V at Prayer' (1922) – hanging in the King Edward VI School library. Dedicated to fallen brothers, the window's legend quotes *Henry V*'s famous line – 'O God of Battles, Steel my Soldiers' Hearts' (4.1.286)⁵ – implying Henry's prayer inspired his soldiers' miraculous victory at Agincourt. After briefly exploring how the text of *Henry V* was 'appropriated' and distorted in abridged performances before World War I, we shall see how scholars later discovered a 'secret play' hidden within the play.⁶ By comparing the mythical ideals frozen in this stained glass window with a close reading of Henry's 'O God of Battles' prayer, this paper intends to shatter his heroic image and reveal Shakespeare's theme that Henry V conspired to 'steal' his soldiers' hearts so he could 'steal' the crown of France.

The King Edward VI School Archives contain a collection of memorabilia from the 1913 *Henry V* theatre and film productions, including programmes, local newspaper reviews, and photographs of young actors posing in medieval costumes, hair, and make-up similar to photos of Frank Benson's Edwardian presentation of *Henry V*. While it is impossible to know the school's interpretation of the play, archival evidence about their presentation is revealed inside the production's aged 'prompt book'⁷ – 'The Picture Shakespeare, King Henry The Fifth'.⁸ This is an abridged version of the play where editors have eliminated lines and sections deemed as inappropriate for British secondary school student productions of this era⁹. Of particular interest are the significant pencilled 'cuts' in the text that eliminate lines, speeches, and scenes that might be offensive. Abridging Shakespeare's plays had been a common theatre practice, and professional actor-managers like Frank Benson notoriously 'cut' Shakespeare's texts to accelerate a play's running time and to eliminate material they considered too controversial or contradictory to their interpretation.¹⁰

Henry V reached its greatest popularity at the outbreak of World War One. Since Britain did not have conscription, actors such as Frank Benson performed at recruitment rallies and 'set all the youth of England on fire' with Shakespeare's explosive speeches. He presented special presentations (entitled 'Shakespeare's War Cry') in the London and suburban theatres. Benson included the speech 'O God of Battles, steel my soldiers' hearts' (Act IV, Sc I) and, of course, the famous St Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V* (Act IV, Sc III). Benson was not alone in his crusade.¹¹ After being rejected from military service due to his advanced age of fifty-seven, Benson mounted 'as many productions of *Henry V* that he could muster'.¹² While many listeners were swept up in the heightened mood of patriotism and national pride, Benson's excessive passion was noted at a Boxing Day show, in 1914: 'his performance throughout was marked by

⁴ Pearson, p. 17.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (London: The Arden Shakespeare), p. 275.

⁶ Ralph Berry, *Changing Styles in Shakespeare* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 77.

⁷ A theatre 'prompt book' is traditionally used by a director and stage manager to record 'cuts' in a play's text. This may contain marginalia with revisions, stage directions and actions, as well as performance notes for the cast.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Picture Shakespeare, King Henry the Fifth* (London: Snead's Publishing House, undated).

⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. by Emma Smith, *Shakespeare in Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 39.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. by Emma Smith, p. 45.

¹¹ L.J. Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), p. 7.

¹² Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 64.

unwonted fervour. Evidently he felt himself not really playing the stage part but delivering a solemn message.¹³

The war's horrifying slaughter decreased British interest in *Henry V's* jingoistic performances as soldiers and citizens began to question propaganda that promised honour and glory for military service. Scholar Gordon Gould had the unique opportunity to understand the disparity between outer surfaces and hidden realities while serving in Britain's secret 'War Propaganda Bureau'. At the war's end, in 1919, Gould published a landmark essay, 'A New Reading of Henry V', claiming Shakespeare had been misinterpreted for three centuries.¹⁴ Gould observed that, instead of being a pro-war play, *Henry V* is subversively ironic, casting its heroic leader as a dangerously charismatic but cruel Machiavellian character:



'No doubt the irony of *Henry V* was meant to 'take in' the groundlings when it was first produced: had it failed to take them in, it would have invited bitter and immediate unpopularity. But Shakespeare can scarcely have intended that the force of preconception should, hundreds of years after his death, still be preventing the careful, the learned, and the sympathetic from seeing what he so definitely put down. The play is ironic.'¹⁵

Gould argues that the practice of 'appropriation' – cutting or taking away critical lines and scenes from *Henry V* productions – served to distort and mislead audiences away from appreciating Shakespeare's powerful anti-war play.¹⁶ The consequence of this 'appropriation' or theft¹⁷ is reflected in Constance Benson's memory of Frank Benson's performance at the Shaftesbury Theatre, in London: 'The stirring words of "Henry V" to his troops before Agincourt made so deep an impression on the audience, that some three hundred (we were told) before our short season was over, had given in their names for enlistment.'¹⁸

Figure 2. Henry Jennings playing 'Ancient Pistol'.

Used by permission, King Edward VI School Archives.

¹³ J.C. Trewin, *Benson and the Bensonians* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), p. 211.

¹⁴ Gerald Gould, 'A New Reading of Henry V', *The English Review* 128 (1919), pp. 42-55, p. 42.

¹⁵ Gould, p. 42.

¹⁶ Gould, p. 42.

¹⁷ Jean I. Marsden (ed.), *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁸ Lady Constance Benson, *Mainly Players: Bensonian Memories* (London: Thorton Butterworth, 1926), p. 281.

In the aftermath of the war, King Edward VI School built a 'Memorial Library' near the playground to commemorate the school's fallen soldiers.¹⁹ At the dedication ceremony, on 12 May 1923, Headmaster Knight read the names of thirty-two fallen 'Old Boys' listed on the library's memorial bronze plaque. Mr and Mrs Howard Jennings presented the stained glass window 'Henry V at Prayer', 1922, to commemorate their fallen sons – Henry Jennings, Second-Lieutenant of the 3rd Battalion, The Worcestershire Regiment (30 April 1916), and Herbert Jennings, Lance Corporal, Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, (9 September 1918). Henry had played 'Ancient Pistol' and Herbert was the 'Earl of Salisbury' in the school's production of *Henry V* before the war.



Figure 3. Herbert Jennings (standing on left) as the 'Earl of Salisbury'.
Used by permission, King Edward VI School Archives.

Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Mr and Mrs Jennings said they chose *Henry V* to honour the work of Shakespeare feeling that 'the illustrious poet who was educated here had, in his matchless language, depicted that spirit of sacrifice and love country which are so essential today'.²⁰

The Jennings parents commissioned Benjamin J. Warren (1878-1954), an artist-teacher from Sparkhill, Birmingham, to create their sons' memorial stained glass window.²¹ Based on a patriotic interpretation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the window also reflects Arthurian influences that characterised the influential Pre-Raphaelite work of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris, both former presidents of the Birmingham Art Gallery and the Birmingham School of Art, where Benjamin Warren studied.²² The stained glass window measures 25 x 17 inches, and is composed of rectangular shapes. Framing the borders are vibrant English heraldic emblems set against green foliage, conveying the story of English troops encamped in Agincourt woods the night before battle. Henry V's open blue cloak reveals his identity – his surcoat is emblazoned with his Royal Lancaster coat of arms – two red panels with symbolic golden lions are quartered with two blue panels with golden French 'fleur-de-lis', symbolising Henry's claim to the English and French crowns.²³ Warren uses white glass to draw the viewer's attention to the window's

¹⁹ Pearson, p. 68.

²⁰ Richard Pearson, *King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's School, History and Alumni* (Norfolk: Gresham Books Limited, 2008).

²¹ Roy Albutt, *Stained Glass Window Makers of Birmingham School of Art* (Pershore: Roy Albutt Publishers, 2013), pp. 81-85.

²² Albutt, p. 6.

²³ Charles Boutell, *English Heraldry* (London & New York: Casell, Petter & Galpin, 1867), pp. 268-269.

central axis where Henry V's radiant face appears, seemingly lit from within. Eyes burning, hands clasped in praying fists, he grips his down-turned sword, its handle and cross-guard forming a golden crucifix. Warren has created a scene of spiritual illumination, alluding to Henry's prayer that led to divinely inspired English victory at Agincourt. The sword's pommel points up to horizontal white glass that backlights the quote: 'O GOD OF BATTLES STEEL MY SOLDIERS HEARTS.'

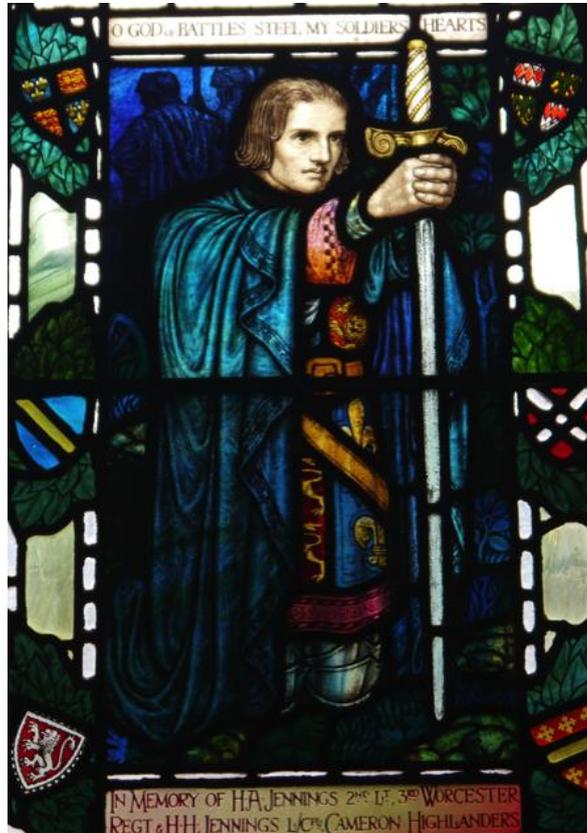


Figure 4. Benjamin J. Warren (1878-1954), 'Henry V at Prayer' (1922). King Edward VI School Memorial Library. Used by permission, King Edward VI School Archives.

Beneath this are of two armoured knights standing against cobalt sky. Vigilantly holding lances, they look off, seeming to wait for battle. Readers familiar with *Henry V* might assume these two figures are 'Williams and Bates' – English soldiers that Henry speaks to in a previous scene. The artist uses a vertical white glass strip to lead the viewer down to another illuminated legend at the bottom of the window:

IN MEMORY OF H.A. JENNINGS 2ND Lt. 3RD WORCESTER REGT &
H.H. JENNINGS LT CRP CAMERON HIGHLANDER

The window now achieves its maximum impact – for in reading the names of Jennings brothers, we look back up to the knights' silhouettes and may imagine the two soldiers are Herbert and Henry Jennings – a real band of brothers.²⁴

²⁴ Pearson, *The Boys of Shakespeare's School*. Henry Jennings played 'Pistol' in the production of *Henry V*. Jennings won many academic prizes in science, debate, and history, as well as honours in Rugby and Cricket, earning the 'Victor Ludorum' ('Winner of the Games' prize) as the school's best athlete (Pearson, *The Boys of Shakespeare's School*, p. 41). Herbert Jennings played 'The Duke of Salisbury' in *Henry V*. Herbert's biggest speech reflects the dire predicament of Henry V's troops before Agincourt – as well as in their own upcoming battles: 'Gods arm strike with us! 'Tis a fearful odds./ God bye you, princes all; I'll to my charge. / If we no more meet till we meet in heaven [...] warriors all, adieu.' *Henry V*, 4.3.5-10 (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1995), p. 286.

Critic A.P. Rossiter observes that Shakespeare created memorable Kings that have a 'constant doubleness', thus designing enigmatic characters that evoke strong, opposing viewpoints and ambiguous feelings from an audience.²⁵ While the traditional heroic version of *Henry V* has been captured in the Jennings memorial stained glass window, the full text shows disturbing dimensions of Henry's cunning and brutality. As stated, abridgments and cuts to Shakespeare's texts were a common theatre practice before World War I. The King Edward School prompt book contains numerous cuts eliminating Henry's dark behaviour, best exemplified in the following abridged scene missing from their performance, revealing Henry's vile threats against the governor of Harfleur if he refuses to surrender:

And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard at heart,
In liberty of bloody hand, shall range
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
Your fresh fair virgins and your flowering infants.
(3.3.11-14)²⁶

.....

If not, why, in a moment look to see
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls,
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
(3.3.33-38)

While editors of this prompt book clearly intended to protect students from shocking material, the cuts eliminated the complex 'doubleness' that Shakespeare intended for Henry's character, leaving audience with a crowd-pleasing but shallow theatrical experience. When actors use Shakespeare's full text, however, Henry V's troubling character traits may initially seem unfathomable, yet his darkness reveals resonant shades of meaning. This is evident in the 'O God of Battles' prayer, where Henry seems lost and alone. His confusion is motivated by a previous scene where he cloaks himself as a common soldier and walks among his troops, hoping to gauge their readiness for battle. He is threatened when soldiers Williams and Bates voice their suspicions that the king may not have 'just cause' to fight for the French crown, and that he will be consequently responsible to God for every soldier's death.²⁷ Henry's rhetorical skills fail him and Williams remains unmoved.²⁸

²⁵ Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Graham Storey (London: Longman, 1961), pp. 246-7.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *Henry V*, (Arden Shakespeare edition by T.W. Craik), pp. 216-217. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from the Arden Shakespeare *Henry V*, Third Edition.

²⁷ Legal Scholar Theodor Meron observes that English knights in the fifteenth-century were influenced by Saint Augustine's belief that a prince was responsible for the sin of waging an 'unjust war' and 'the duty of obedience preserved the soldier's innocence' before God. Theodor Meron, *Bloody Constraint: War and Chivalry in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 160.

²⁸ Pearson, p. 17. Victor Hyatt played 'Williams' in the King Edward VI School production of *Henry V*. A superior athlete, Victor was Captain of the cricket team and winner of Gymnastic Challenge Cup in 1913. He had been in France for just under a month when, on 5 December 1915, a shell exploded near his muddy trench, and he was crushed under sandbags. A letter in the King Edward VI School archives from schoolmate Ronald Newland (who played French King Charles VI in *Henry V*) comments on Victor's final moments: 'It is the greatest sorrow I ever had, for after all he was the greatest friend I ever had. The only possible consolation I can hold out to you is that he suffered no pain and death was practically instantaneous.'



Figure 5. Victor Hyatt as 'Williams'.

Used by permission, King Edward VI School Archives.

Henry walks off alone and 'kneels' to pray: 'O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts.' Henry's words 'my soldiers' indicate his sense of 'possession' over these men. While this may suggest paternalistic concern for their well-being, the statement also allows us to question whether he actually has the 'just cause' to have put these soldiers in this dangerous situation at all. This answer is debatable for audience members who know *Henry IV* (part 2) and remember King Henry IV's dying advice to his son: 'Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels' (4.5.213-214).²⁹ Astute viewers may thus suspect that Henry is avoiding another rebellion in England with this distracting and unjustified foreign invasion in France. In the King Edward School production of *Henry V*, the dubious and convoluted discussions between Henry and the Prelates over his right in attacking France have been 'cut' in the prompt book, further creating suspicion that Henry's conquest is criminal. Henry's prayer asking God to 'give his soldiers courage' is also confusing. By mischaracterising Williams' reasoned arguments as irrational and motivated by fear, Henry seems to deceive God in his prayer.

The word 'steel' in the text means to 'stiffen' or 'harden' the body and emotions.³⁰ As Shakespeare's plays were designed for performance, however, listeners might initially hear Henry say, 'steal my soldiers' hearts' – meaning 'to take away' or 'snatch' – before

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. A.R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare: Third Series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), p. 155.

³⁰ Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2014). 'Steel', v, 'fig. To make hard, unbending, or strong as steel, to render insensible to impression, to make determined or obdurate, to nerve or strengthen.'

the meaning 'strengthen my soldier's hearts' is understood. Given his argument with Williams and Bates, Henry's prayer to 'steel' his 'soldiers' hearts' also means 'steal' (take away) their humanity and critical thoughts. Shakespeare slyly has Henry unconsciously use further damning synonyms for 'stealing':

Possess them not with fear. Take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if th' opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

(4.1.287-289)

Henry's words 'possess', 'take from', and 'pluck' reveal his family's compulsion to appropriate, thief, and usurp. Shakespeare's use of the word 'reckoning' creates multiple meanings. Henry heard Williams use the word 'reckoning' earlier – 'if the cause be not good, the King himself / hath a heavy reckoning to make...' (4.1.134-135). By echoing Williams' word, Henry asks God to 'take from them now / the sense of reckoning,' i.e. take away soldiers' judgments, opinions, and arguments that conflict with his mission. Given that Henry's family has been cursed by dark prophecies, a terrible 'reckoning' also means 'retribution, fate, doom, and punishment.'³¹ As with Shakespeare's polysemantic use of the word 'steel', we realise that the word 'reckoning' – or reck'ning – in performance may sound like the word 'wreck', i.e. 'destroy'. This play on words might lead an audience to hear 'but if the cause be not good, the King hath a heavy wreck-ning to make' – suggesting Henry might criminally destroy something without right.

The subject of an unjust war reverberates throughout the play and in Henry's psyche. Guilt-ridden, he continues with his prayer, revealing what haunts him most:

Not today, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!

(4.1.289-291)

Henry V is tormented by the curse caused by Henry IV's usurpation of the divinely anointed King Richard II. While Henry attempted to absolve himself from his soldiers' fates on the battlefield, he now suggests he is also not culpable for his father's crimes either, arguing against the belief that God's judgement is motivated by 'the biblical doctrine of inherited guilt.'³² After distancing himself from his father, Henry attempts to prove his spiritual affinity to his Holy Father by lauding his own penitent acts of contrition:

I Richard's body have interred anew;
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears
Than from it issued forced drops of blood.

(4.1.292-294)

Henry extolls his own piety, missing the irony that his atonement has been earned with money instead of good works:

Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,
Who twice a-day their wither'd hands hold up
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard's soul.

(4.1.295-299)

³¹ Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 2014) 'Reckoning', n., 'The action or an act of accounting to God after death for (one's) conduct in life.'

³² Robert Rentoul Reed, Jr, *Crime and God's Judgement in Shakespeare* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), p. 1.

His euphemistic words 'pardon blood' verbally cover up 'Richard's murder' as he asks God to forgive him for being Henry IV's son.³³ His prayer reaches a crescendo, then fades as Henry realises he has protested too much, and finishes with exhausted apologies:

More will I do,
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,
Since that my penitence comes after all,
Imploring pardon.

(4.1.299-302)

Henry realises it may be too late to 'reckon' with his father's crimes. Yet his surrender may be a sly negotiation with God, hinting that a gift of divine protection in battle will allow Henry to atone for King Richard in the future.

The memorial window, 'Henry V at Prayer', portrays a patriotic hero, frozen in stained glass from a simpler time. After the war, audiences who had suffered through years of loss and propaganda were ready for a darker truth, and a new trend in Shakespeare productions began to include entire texts in performance.³⁴ By stealing back this arsenal of actions and words, actors are able to explore the full range of Henry's charm, cruelty, poetry, and troubling duality, allowing interpretations that celebrate or condemn acts of war, and leave some audiences to cheer, others uncertain, and many horrified by their attraction and revulsion of Shakespeare's contradictory and charismatic king.

³³ Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, p. 227.

³⁴ Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, ed. by Emma Smith, p. 45.

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