

PETER SCHECKNER

Renegades in the Literature of War: From Homer to Heller

In her study of Homer's epic called *The Iliad or a Poem of Force*, Simone Weil wrote:

The only people who can give the impression of having risen to a higher plane, who seem superior to ordinary human misery, are the people who resort to the aids of illusion, exaltation, and fanaticism, to conceal the harshness of destiny from their own eyes. The man who does not wear the armor of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul.¹

GIVEN THE INHERENT INSANITY OF WAR, THAT IT TURNS conventional morality and nearly everyone and all social institutions upside down, it is not surprising that, at least in literature, war's most articulate critics are comics, madmen, or miscreants. And although we (or even the authors themselves) may laugh at them, or try to distance ourselves from what they are saying, our laughter may also enlighten us; it can even transform who we once thought we were.

A renegade is someone who rebels, becomes an outlaw or a deserter. He (or in the case of Brecht's *Mother Courage*, she) may be a disloyal person who betrays or deserts his cause or religion or political party; a renegade may be a rebel who breaks with established customs; or a recreant, having deserted a cause or principle.

The Thersites that appears first in Homer's *Iliad* and then in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Josef Svejek in Jaroslav Haske's *The Good Soldier Svejek*, Mother Courage, and Joseph Heller's Captain John Yossarian in *Catch-22* are inherently subversive because theirs is a world defined by war, a world in which they want no part. "How shameful for you, the high and mighty commander, to lead the sons of Achaea into bloody slaughter," Thersites taunted Agamemnon. "Give me life," yelled Falstaff, on the battlefield of Shrewsbury. "Be furious you're going to die," Yossarian cried. "And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us."

These six miscreants laid bare the essential duplicity of war — of who fights it, for what reason, and for whom. Mother Courage continued profiting from twelve years of nearly continuous warfare while her children and maybe a third of Europe were slaughtered echoed Thersites' uncomfortable accusations against Agamemnon: who benefits from war and who loses? The term "Thersitism" was coined by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his essay on "The Individual as Subject of History" to mean a character "who abuses the kings [and who] is a standing figure for all times."²

The subject of the *Iliad*, the oldest extant work of Western literature, is war, and here the first truly anti-war renegade in literature makes his appearance — Thersites, a commoner. As described by Homer, he is "the ugliest man who ever came to Troy. Bandy-legged he was, with one foot clubbed, both shoulders humped together, curving over his caved-in chest." Thersites appears only in Book 2, in the Robert Fagles translation lines 246 to 324, for a grand total of 78 lines.

However brief his showing in an eighth century BC poem of over 15,000 lines, Thersites has never been sidelined. It is he who strips away the lies and exaltation of war of such greater-than-life men as Agamemnon, Achilles, Odysseus, and Menelaus. Thersites's words have resonated ever since, both in literature and in philosophy. Shakespeare adopted him for his one-man chorus in *Troilus and Cressida* and, for over two centuries, he has been a model for other enduring anti-war renegades in literature — Falstaff, Brecht's Mother Courage, Josef Svejek, and Yossarian.

Homer made the subsequent ridicule of authority in literature seem utterly rational. Even Mother Courage, a twentieth century creation by a communist dramatist and poet, and hardly a humorous character, is ideologically close to the original Thersites: both understand that war often camouflages greed; behind the

kings' high blown rhetoric is a business interest — someone is getting wealthy at everyone else's expense.

In Book 2 of the *Iliad* Thersites, stands up to tell the assembled Greek armies that they are fighting in Troy essentially for the benefit of the mightily greedy Agamemnon. Thersites' objection to the entire enterprise is the only speech in the *Iliad* delivered by a common soldier. It reverberates throughout the poem and, though it comes from the ugliest man who ever came to Troy, it is accurate. Thersites essentially replicates Achilles' own tirades against Agamemnon:

“Still moaning and groaning, mighty Atrides — why now? What are you panting after now? Your huts stuffed with bronze, plenty of choice women, too — all presents we Achaeans give you as our leader, whenever we ransack some city. Or are you in need of still more gold, a ransom fetched by some horse-taming Trojan for his son tied up and delivered here by me or by some other Achaean? Or do you want a young girl to stash away, so you can screw her all by yourself? It's just not fair that you, our leader, have botched things up so badly for us, Achaea's sons. But you men, you soldiers, cowardly comrades, disgraceful people, you're Achaean women, not warriors. Let's sail home in our ships, leave this man, our king, right here in Troy to enjoy his loot. That way he might come to recognize whether or not we're of some use to him.”³

Thersites says all this to the king in front of the great gathering. And whereas for most of Homer's poem it is often the power of words that carry the day, not this time. Odysseus prevents a general Greek mutiny by humiliating Thersites:

What a flood of abuse, Thersites! Even for you,
Fluent and flowing as you are. Keep quiet.
Who are *you* to wrangle with kings, you alone?
. . . . stop your babbling, mouthing the names of kings. . . . (lines 285-290)

Then, to emphasize the point, the warlord of Ithaca cracks his scepter across the back and shoulders of Thersites. Of all his deeds, Homer writes, “here's the best thing yet [Odysseus has] done for his men — he's put a stop to this babbling, foulmouthed fool!” In short, the great tactician has prevented a rebellious general retreat precipitated by a nobody “who was always abusing his chiefs.”

Nearly everything said about war in literature after Homer is a reprise of what can be found in the *Iliad*. The difference between subsequent writers and Homer is one of degree: while the appeal of the warrior is still acknowledged — Shakespeare's

Hotspur and King Henry V are examples — the voices and arguments against war get louder and more sophisticated.

Nearly three millennia after the *Iliad*, having digested the medieval effects of a religious affinity for continual warfare from Richard II to Henry V, Shakespeare took on the chivalric code of honor. *Henry IV Part One* does two things rather dialectically: it elevates Prince Hal and Henry Percy to a heroic status, and through one character — Sir John Falstaff — the work deflates the whole ugly business of war, chivalry, and the medieval code of honor. Falstaff, not Prince Henry, articulates a realistic view of what war means to ordinary soldiers, none of whom were made safe by the pretentious rhetoric of princes about honor or heroic deeds. Falstaff may be self-serving, a whoremonger, an occasional drunk, and a cynic about his own men whose lives are squandered by the war, but he values life above all else, and his own lusts endanger no one. The earls and the princes from the Houses of Lancaster and York are the ones spreading corpses around the battlefields of England.

On the eve of the battle of Shrewsbury, Hotspur, the play's paradigm of medieval honor and bravery, welcomes the coming butchery. "Come, let us take a muster speedily. / Doomsday is near. Die all, die merrily."³ Falstaff alone articulates what such honor will bring. His own "pitiful rascals" in his company are "good enough to toss [at the end of a pike]; / food for powder, food for powder, they'll fill a pit as well as better. / Tush, man," he says to the Prince, "mortal men, mortal men" (4.2.66-68). And whereas the Prince, soon to be Henry V, says with sincerity, "For my part, I may speak it to my shame, / I have a truant been to chivalry" (5.1. 93-4), Falstaff knows the cost of such chivalry.

Mocking Prince Henry's grand plan to redeem himself in the eyes of his father, Henry IV, Falstaff carries a bottle of sack in his pistol case. Not amused, Hal throws the bottle at him. Left alone on the battlefield, Falstaff reflects on the scorecard of war, observing about the ordinary soldier what has eluded every king from Agamemnon to Henry V: "I have led my rag-of-muffins where they are peppered. There's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life" (5.3.36-38).

More than half the lines in the play are given to the two Henrys and Falstaff and appear to be equally divided among them. Whereas Hotspur and later Hal posture about heroic deeds on the battlefield, Falstaff's skepticism resonates with simplicity and honesty. On the field of battle at Shrewsbury, the knight rebukes royalty's notion of honor. "Honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No, therefore I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon

— and so ends my catechism” (5.1.129ff.). Two scenes later, seeing the body of Sir Walter Blunt, Falstaff remarks, “I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath. Give me life; which if I can save, so; if not, honor comes unlooked for, and there’s an end” (5.3.59-61).

Notwithstanding the heroic grandstanding of Hotspur and Hal, nothing in the *Henry IV* plays eclipses the line: “Give me life,” and every patriotic banality glorifying war is exposed by Fat Jack as a fatal deception. Svejik and Yossarian would have understood.

In his bleak satire *Troilus and Cressida* (written shortly after *Hamlet* and four years after *Henry IV*), Shakespeare takes the great Homeric figures — Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Aeneas, Ulysses, and Hector — and deflates them. They are portrayed as cowards and brutes. Thersites is back, this time as a one-man chorus, and his message is utterly scornful. “All the argument” of the Trojan War is, in Thersites’ words, “is a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon” and the great warriors “all incontinent varlets” (5.1. 99).

In no other play does Shakespeare more openly expose the incompatibility of war and honor. Thersites’ taunt to Achilles that he is the “idol of idiot-worshippers” (5.1.7) is echoed throughout the work, and in act five an unarmed Hector is set upon by Achilles and his Myrmidons and simply butchered. With the heroic legends of the Trojan War now utterly ridiculed, Pandarus ends the play by referring to “some galled goose of Winchester” (a diseased prostitute) and then promises to “sweat and seek about for eases, /And at that time bequeath you my diseases” (5.10, 54-56).

Thersites, by conventional social standards the most scurrilous of characters, rises above the real depravity of those war lovers for whom life is trivial. “Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion. A burning devil [presumably syphilis] take them” (5.2. 197-99)! Thus does Shakespeare’s Thersites, not unlike his Homeric predecessor, summarize an unpleasant truth of the Trojan War.

Jaroslav Hasek’s *The Good Soldier’s Svejik* is to the First World War what John Yossarian is to World War Two and Brecht’s *Mother Courage* is to the Thirty Years War. Both Heller and Brecht acknowledged Hasek as their literary model. The author’s friend Josef Lada illustrated Svejik (that rhymes aptly with “ache”), and the Czech soldier looks a little like Falstaff — overweight, untidy, and run to seed. Whereas Hegel’s term “Thersitism” was a tribute to the power of Homer’s little rebellious commoner, “a standing figure for all times,” “Schweikism” came to mean a sort of simple-minded, passive resistance to authority by a “little man” who gets caught in the wheels of a bureaucratic war machine. Svejik is either a straight-talking patent idiot, or a doubling-talking master of irony, but in any case

he maddens every military, clerical, and civilian authority figure he encounters in the declining days of the Imperial House of Hapsburg. He is a subtler Thersites or a less boisterous Falstaff set loose everywhere. By the power of the non sequitur, Svejik renders ridiculous the assumed gravitas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as that regime falls apart.

The good soldier simply refuses to acknowledge the validity of war. Whereas Falstaff brought a bottle of sack instead of his pistol to the battlefield and so enrages the Prince, and Thersites was a solitary voice of skepticism raised against the Trojan War, Svejik appears oblivious to the righteousness of war. When told by his charwoman in the opening passage of the book that “our Ferdinand” has been killed, thus beginning the First World War, Svejik in all seriousness asks, “Which Ferdinand? I know two” — one a chemist’s messenger and one who collects dogshit. “Neither of them is any loss,” Svejik observes.⁶

During a Russian advance, Svejik puts on an enemy’s uniform “as an experiment,” he says, “to see how it would feel to be in a foreign uniform.” He is arrested by his own side as a spy, thus setting off a chain reaction that ultimately portrays the Austro-Hungarian military court as a carnival of bloodthirsty bureaucrats. Facing summary execution, Svejik’s nonchalance and meanderings make fools of everyone. By the time it’s nearly over, the drunken prosecuting major wakes up snuggled against Svejik in the prisoner’s cell, and an Austrian spy sent to unmask Svejik’s complicity with the enemy is nearly driven insane.

Svejik does all this by beginning each of his endless non-sequiturs with “Humbly report, sir,” until the Austrian Imperial and Royal imprimatur is rendered foolish, if not moronic. When the Austrian informer posing as a fellow Russian soldier of war tries to trick a confession out of Svejik, the good Czech simply changes the agenda. “You don’t trust me. But after all we must both expect the same fate,” the secret agent persists. Svejik’s response, a masterpiece of digression, is a quintessential Svejikism:

“That’s why we’re soldiers,” said Svejik nonchalantly. “It was for that our mothers bore us — so that we could be made mincemeat of when we were put into uniform. And we do it gladly, because we know that our bones won’t rot in vain. We shall fall for His Imperial Majesty and His Royal Family, for whom we won Herzegovina. Out of our bones they’ll make charcoal for sugar refineries.” (687)

Told by his lieutenant that Svejek and his comrades were a “pack of swine,” “barbarous hogs,” and “useless monkeys” whose shanks and paws would be turned into bone charcoal through which the men’s coffee would be filtered, the good soldier replies:

“Humbly report, I’ve been thinking that the bone charcoal which is made out of you officer gentlemen must be much more expensive than what’s made out of us ordinary soldiers” (687). For that remark Svejek got three days’ solitary confinement.

Like Thersites and Falstaff, the Czech refuses to respect war’s legitimacy or even its reality. Whether Svejek is a simpleton, an idiot, profoundly inattentive, or a very clever schemer, hardly changes the huge joke he is making of the military bureaucracy of which he wants no part.

Brecht’s *Mother Courage* was written about fifteen years after the death of Hasek in 1923. The play is predicated on Thersites’ accusation that war profits the warmakers. In *Henry IV*, Falstaff admits that he has “misused the King’s press damnably. I have got, in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers, three hundred and odd pounds.” For this sum of money Falstaff has apparently “unloaded all the gibbets and pressed the dead bodies. No eye hath seen such scarecrows” (4.2. 12, 37-39). In short, he has profited from a war fought between two noblemen named Henry for the English throne. *Mother Courage* embodies Falstaff’s cynicism to the fullest. “Courage,” Brecht wrote in his “Notes,” “recognizes the purely commercial nature of the war; indeed, this is what attracts her to it. She believes in the war right to the end.”

War, the playwright tells us, “is a business idyll.”⁷ As a small-time capitalist in a European capitalist venture called the Thirty Years War, *Courage* counts on the profit motive as her one true ally in a holocaust of ever-changing alliances among Catholic-Protestant powers. “Thank the Lord they’re corruptible,” she tells the Chaplain. “After all, they ain’t wolves, just humans out for money. Corruption in humans is same as compassion in God. Corruption’s our only hope.” The setting of the play is 1624 to 1636, twelve years before the historical war ended in Europe, and during this time *Courage* sells her goods to whoever can afford them. She subscribes to no ideology other than safeguarding her children and her profits. Towards that end she achieves virtually nothing.

Though *Courage* herself utters few anti-war sentiments — and why would she rail at her source of income? — the play itself demonstrates that war swindles

ordinary people out of their homes, their possessions, and ultimately their lives. *Mother Courage*, the work itself, condemns all ideologies that support war as a hoax. “To the people,” wrote Brecht in his “Notes” to the play, “war is neither an uprising nor a business operation, merely a disaster,” and the work itself, removed from the understanding of its principal character, “functions in terms of the present state of consciousness of the majority of mankind” (Brecht 95). In other words, on the eve of the Second World War when this play was written, Brecht warns his countrymen against endorsing war as a solution to anything.

Like Brecht’s play, *Catch-22* (1961) focuses mainly on the reality that entrepreneurs far behind the battlefields make a great deal of money. Captain John Yossarian, another anti-war hero like Thersites and *Mother Courage*, believes none of the official propaganda about war’s purposes. In *Mother Courage* the real enemy was not the Protestants or the Catholics but the greed of various monarchs from the Holy Roman Empire, France, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands. In *Catch-22*, Yossarian recognizes that his superior officers, men like Colonel Cathcart, Colonel Korn, and Milo Minderbinder, are capable of shooting, not necessarily the Nazis, but anyone standing in the way of M & M Enterprises, an Allies-Axis joint venture using warplanes from both sides to shuttle goods all around the globe.

With allied and German planes carrying produce all over Europe and with business booming, Milo signs contracts with both the American and German military authorities to bomb each other’s bridges. Milo realizes his profit margin will be much higher if, instead of using the syndicate’s men and material, he uses what is already available to him — American B-25 bombers. “It was an ideal arrangement for everyone but the dead man in Yossarian’s tent, who was killed over the target the day he arrived.”⁸ Milo orders the bombing of his own outfit rather than breach a deal he had with the Germans. Heller describes the consequences of deliberate American friendly fire against its own airbase:

Decent people everywhere were affronted, and Milo was all washed up until he opened his books to the public and disclosed the tremendous profit he had made. He could reimburse the government for all the people and property he had destroyed and still have enough money left over to continue buying Egyptian cotton. Everybody, of course, owned a share. And the sweetest part of the whole deal was that there really was no need to reimburse the government at all. “In a democracy, the government is the people,” Milo explained. “We’re the people, aren’t we?” (269)

Yossarian beholds a world not of black shirts and of democratic khaki squaring off in a battle of good versus evil, but rather a world “of shivering, stupefying misery in a world that never yet had provided enough heat and food and justice for all but an ingenious and unscrupulous handful” (422). Between the reality of war and every ideal, Yossarian sees only the bottom line: “When I look up, I see people cashing in. I don’t see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy” (455).

Given the torrent of shibboleths coming from the mouths of kings, generals, and other war lovers from Homer on, the West has never run out of great anti-war renegades, at least in literature. And although neither Falstaff, the good soldier Svejik, Yossarian, or Mother Courage managed to single-handedly scuttle their respective war enterprises, Homer’s Thersites came very close.

Notes

1. Simon Weil, *The Iliad Or The Poem Of Force*. Translated by James P. Holoka. (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 36.
2. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Translated by Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984).
3. Homer, *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990) lines 262-277.
4. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part One* (New York: Signet Classic, Penguin Books, 1998), 4.1.133-34.
5. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 2.3.71.
6. Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejik*. Translated by Cecil Parrott (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 3-4.
7. Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Translated by John Willett (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 93.
8. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster. 1994), 265.

PETER SCHECKNER is a professor of literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey. He is the author of *Class, Politics, and the Individual: A Study of the Major Works of D. H. Lawrence*, the editor of *An anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s-1850s*, and the editor of *The Way We Work: Contemporary Writings from the American Workplace*, to be published in August, 2008.