

Kill, Kill, Kill

Peter Moore

Shakespeare repeats the word “kill” at three places in his works. *Venus and Adonis* has “And in a peaceful hour doth cry, ‘Kill, kill!’” (652) *Coriolanus* features “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him.” (V.vi.130) And *King Lear*, of course, provides:

And when I have stolen upon these son-in-laws,
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

(IV.v. 179 or IV.vi.188, depending on the edition)

It may be added that the French equivalent, *tue, tue, tue*, is found twice in Marlowe’s *The Massacre of Paris*, in scenes vii and xii. Edmond Malone asserted that “[t]his was formerly the word given in the English army, when an onset was made on the enemy,” and he offered an example from the 1610 edition of *The Mirrour for Magistrates*:

For while the Frenchmen fresk assaulted still,
Our Englishmen came boldly forth at night,
Crying St. George, Salisbury, *kill, kill*,
And offered freshly with their foes to fight.¹

Other literary examples of “kill, kill” as an English war cry have been noted in the works of John Cotgrave and Michael Drayton, and in Sir Thomas North’s *Plutarch*.² The purpose of this article is to show with examples taken from the battlefield, rather than from writers who may never have seen combat, that English and French soldiers of that period actually did use that expression.

The first instances come from a fascinating but little studied work, the memoirs of Elis Gruffydd, a Welsh soldier of long service under Henry VIII and Edward VI.³ In October 1544, the Dauphin of France (the future Henry II) launched a famous night attack to retake English-held Boulogne. The French overran the lower part of the town, Basse Boulogne, but the English sortied from the houses and then from the citadel above:

Then the Englishmen smote their enemies valiantly and killed them in the cruellest way, at which time the gate of Upper Boulogne was opened and a large number of soldiers dribbled out shouting loudly their warcry “Kill, kill.” These words the Dauphin heard and they abashed the pride of his

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heart which had been lifted up with the greatest joy while he heard the voice of the French shouting Tuwe tuwe tuwe.⁴

In 1545, the French were holding the fortress of Ardres on the edge of the English Pale, where much of the local population had been French subjects of the King of England for two centuries. They attempted to starve Ardres into submission.

A company of French happened to come with food. The people of Guisnes [an English possession near Calais] got wind of this and went into ambush in the forest between Ardres and Licques. There the French fell into the lap of the men of Guisnes who struck at them crying their cry in English Kil kil kil. This made the French turn and flee back to Licques.⁵

The English cry was recorded in the *Commentaires* of Blaise de Monluc, a Marshal of France. In 1544 de Monluc, then a captain, and a few companions encountered a large troop of Englishmen, who challenged:

Who goeth there? c'est-a-dire: Qui va la? Je leur respondis en anglais:

A friend! a friend! qui veut dire: amy! amy!... Comme ces Anglois eurent faict d'aultres demandes, et que je feuz au bout de mon latin, ilz poursuyvirent en criant: quill! quill! quill! c'est-a-dire: tue! tue! tue!⁶

A final French example is found in Motley's *Dutch Republic* concerning the 1583 assault on Antwerp, launched by the Duke of Anjou, longtime suitor to Queen Elizabeth.

Along these great thoroughfares [leading to the center of the city] the French soldiers advanced at a rapid pace, the cavalry clattering furiously in the van, shouting: "Ville gaignee, ville gaignee! vive la messe, vive la messe! tue, tue, tue!"⁷

In short, Malone was substantially correct about Shakespeare's "kill, kill," though a better definition might be "a war cry used by both French and English."

Notes

1. E. Malone, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, (1821), x, 233-4, and 315.
2. P. Brockbank, *The Arden Shakespeare, Coriolanus* (1976), 309-10 and F.T. Prince, *The Arden Shakespeare, The Poems* (1960), 37.
3. M.B. Davies, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Fouad University* (Cairo), "Suffolk's Expedition to Montdidier" (July 1944), vii, 33-43; "The 'Enterprises' of Paris and Boulogne" (May 1949), xi, i, 37-95; and "Boulogne and Calais from 1545 to 1550" (May 1950), xii, i, 1-90.
4. Davies, "The 'Enterprises' of Paris and Boulogne," 90.
5. Davies, "Boulogne and Calais from 1545 to 1550," 2.

6. Blaise de Monluc, *Commentaires et Lettres* (Paris, 1864), i, ii, 299. [Who goeth there? that is to say: Qui va la! I answered them in English: A friend! that says: ami! ami!... As these English made other questions, and as I was at the end of my Latin (i.e., at my wit's end), they pursued shouting: kill! kill! kill! that is to say: tue! tue! tue!]
7. J.L. Motley, *The Complete Works* (1863), v, 301. [The city is won! Long live the mass! Kill, kill, kill!]

Postscript on the Memoirs of Elis Gruffydd

I would like to take this opportunity to discuss Gruffydd's memoirs briefly. The manuscript, written in Welsh, is in the Mostyn MS in the National Library of Wales. The portion translated and edited by M. Bryn Davies is only a fraction of the whole. Parts of it, translated by Prys Morgan, were used by Muriel St. Clare Byrne in her edition of *The Lisle Letters*. So far as I know, no one has undertaken a scholarly analysis of the work, starting with checking all verifiable facts to gauge Gruffydd's reliability. But, based on my spot checks, he seems to be quite accurate when he is close to events, less accurate concerning distant matters.

Gruffydd was a servant to Sir Robert Wingfield at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, and provides a detailed description of Francis I. Gruffydd followed Wingfield in the Duke of Suffolk's campaign of 1523, and joined the garrison of Calais in 1527. He remained there until at least 1550, when his memoirs end, rising to be a minor officer. I know of no similar memoirs for this period, particularly not from someone of such low social origins.

As Davies remarks, Gruffydd was something of a Fluellen, given to quoting Julius Caesar and praising Harry of Monmouth. Gruffydd was also a chronic complainer, a type familiar in all armies, and to such a degree that he could be labeled a misanthrope. He became a rabid apocalyptic Protestant, and his evaluation of contemporary English generals is largely a function of their religion. Protestants like Lords Suffolk, Poynings, and Clinton are praised, while quasi-Catholic conservatives like the poet Earl of Surrey are denounced as ungodly, vainglorious, and unreasoning, albeit brave and scholarly.

Gruffydd came to suffer from a mental condition that often strikes old soldiers who have been too long in garrison. Specifically, he felt that the armies of his youth were full of brave men and true, as opposed to the young soldiers, and especially young officers, who came through Calais in the 1540s. He saw the newcomers as soft, decadent, rash, and insufficiently respectful toward their elders. A good deal of his bile toward Surrey was caused by the latter's youth. Still, it is very much to Gruffydd's credit as a memoirist that he quotes the response of a youngster to his prosing about the good old days:

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Aha sirs now we must listen to an old man of the king's with a red nose [symbol of drinking]. Bring him a stool to sit on and a cup of beer warmed up and a piece of burnt bread to clear his throat [sic] so that he can talk of his exploits at Therouanne and Tournai [in 1513—Henry VIII's first campaign] up to today.

Gruffydd is valuable in a number of ways. First, he provides largely accurate, detailed accounts of events in a stirring but underdocumented age. I came across him while researching a piece on the downfall of the Earl of Surrey. Gruffydd's description of Surrey's defeat on January 7, 1546 tracks very closely with the detailed report that Surrey wrote the next day, as well as adding color and particulars, such as Surrey's rage during and after the rout. Next, Gruffydd offers cameos on famous men, ranging from Great Harry himself to the soldier poet Sir Francis Ryan. Last, he lets you know in often memorable language what it was like to be one of Henry VIII's soldiers, as when he describes the flight of some French cavalry in 1544, "as soon as they heard the sound of arrows flying like a shower of snow, crippling some horses and killing others."