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Beyond Shallow and Silence

War in the Age of Shakespeare

In *2 Henry IV*, Shakespeare famously satirizes the recruitment of soldiers for war in a scene involving Justices Shallow and Silence. These two gentlemen, supposedly justices of the peace (JPs) in Gloucestershire, have summoned a handful of local men for military service selection by Sir John Falstaff and his corporal, Bardolph: Ralph Moldy, Simon Shadow, Thomas Wart, Francis Feeble, and Peter Bullcalf. As the names suggest, this is a richly comedic scene. The garrulous Justice Robert Shallow – unchallenged by his kinsman, the aptly named Justice Silence – cannot even count beyond the number of fingers on one hand. Instead of the “half a dozen sufficient men” requested by Falstaff (3.2.87), Shallow and Silence have mustered only five men for the selection. Nevertheless, Shallow insists “here is two more called than your number” (3.2.170) and repeatedly states that Falstaff can reject two men and still meet the quota of four recruits. When Falstaff and Bardolph accept bribes from Moldy and Bullcalf to release them, the levy ultimately produces only three men for the army – and patently the least physically impressive specimens. Falstaff’s bombastic justification for his choices only seems to confirm the incompetence and unfairness of the process. When Falstaff finally assures Justice Shallow that “these fellows will do well” (3.2.258), the comedy of the scene suggests the exact opposite is true.

Although supposedly portraying the raising of soldiers to fight for Henry IV against domestic rebels in 1405, the recruitment scene in *2 Henry IV* reflects the practices of Shakespeare’s own day, not those of Lancastrian England. Scholars have long recognized this fact, and the comic bumbling of Justices Shallow and Silence has frequently been cited to characterize the military capacity of Elizabethan England as equally amateurish and corrupt. There is a grain of truth in this view. Historical parallels can be found for all of the comedic features of Falstaff’s perverse recruitment process, including incompetent local officials, bribery for exemption from service, and unfortunate misfits being forced off to war. Shakespeare’s contemporaries also apparently recognized the realities that inspired the scene and enjoyed the

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joke. Writing at the start of James I's reign in England, Sir Charles Percy teased a correspondent that an extended spell of "contrie businesse" in Gloucestershire would make him "so dull that I shall bee taken for Justice Silence or Justice Shallow." Percy asked his friend to send him reports of news from London. Such reports "will not exempt mee from the opinion of a Justice Shallow at London, yet I will assure you thee [they] will make mee passe for a very sufficient gentleman in Gloceshshire."¹

Despite the farcical proceedings portrayed through Justices Shallow and Silence, war became an increasingly real and intrusive presence in the lives of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Directly or indirectly, fighting or preparing for war – and, above all, paying for these things – touched the lives of virtually everyone in Elizabethan England and Wales on a regular basis. Over the course of Elizabeth I's long reign, the nature of war itself also changed, reflecting broader changes in military technology, battlefield tactics, and bureaucratic and financial developments. Together, these changes drove a "renaissance" or "revolution" in European war-fighting during the sixteenth century and set the scene for further escalation in the seventeenth century.²

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, England's military capacity seemed alarmingly weak. Although Henry VIII had succeeded in wresting the port of Boulogne from France (at terrible cost) in 1544, Edward VI's government signed it away in the wake of Protector Somerset's disastrous attempt to occupy parts of Scotland, which left England militarily and financially crippled. French troops were also now stationed on its northern land border. In 1557, Mary I's desperation to salvage her marriage to Philip of Spain thrust England into a new war with France. English troops figured prominently in the great French defeat at St. Quentin, but only a few months later French forces captured Calais, eliminating England's last-remaining prize from the Hundred Years' War. Mary's government proved humiliatingly unable to defend or recover the town. The loss of Calais on New Year's Day, 1558 not only demoralized England but transformed its strategic outlook. For more than 200 years, Calais and its surrounding fortresses had served as both the front line of defense against France and a key base for attacking it. Now England had lost its last Continental toehold. Henceforth, the front line would be the Channel or, worse, the harbors and beaches of England itself.³

Elizabeth's England joined the general peace embodied in the 1559 Treaty of Cambrai but that peace seemed alarmingly tenuous. France remained hostile, serious tensions soon arose with Spain, and Elizabeth's reinstatement of Protestantism in her realm opened the way for new threats fueled by religious zeal. Elizabeth and her advisers frantically sought to rebuild

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England's shattered military power. Arms and armor were secretly imported from Germany and the Low Countries to restock the realm's empty arsenals, breaching an imperial ban on arms exports. Elizabeth also sought to support her coreligionists, but avoid open war, by providing aid to Scottish (and later to French and Dutch) Protestants in forms that offered her plausible deniability. Money was sent in the form of foreign coins. English officers supposedly went to join Protestant rebellions abroad merely on their own individual initiative, as did the growing numbers of volunteer soldiers who served under them. Elizabeth feigned an inability to prevent private gentlemen from raising such forces and leading them abroad, even though royal officials actively facilitated their movement. By the 1580s, the stream of English Protestant adventurers had swelled to become an army of several thousand volunteers fighting in the Low Countries. Elizabeth also provided logistical and financial support for French and Dutch Protestants within England itself. When Elizabeth launched an overt military intervention in Scotland in 1560, the costly failures of English troops at the siege of Leith made the venture a close-run thing. Ultimately, France withdrew its troops and Scotland underwent a Calvinist revolution. This opened the way for a new amity between England and Scotland, winding down centuries of bitter conflict. However, things might have ended very differently if France had not been distracted by its own religious strife at home. A subsequent official English occupation of the French port of Le Havre (Newhaven to the Elizabethans) in 1562–63 resulted in a crushing defeat. To make matters worse, the surviving English troops spread an outbreak of plague. Perhaps 20,000 died in London alone. After this humiliation, Elizabeth avoided official military action on the Continent until she was finally forced to cast aside all pretense in 1585.⁴

The Elizabethan rebuilding of England's military defenses stepped up dramatically in the 1570s. To counter the growing threat of Spain – and especially the powerful army that it established in Flanders in 1567 – England adopted what would today be called an “offset strategy” by investing heavily in rebuilding and expanding the queen's fleet of warships. Geoffrey Parker has called this “the *Dreadnought* revolution of Tudor England.”⁵ The queen's new (or rebuilt) warships reflected lessons learned by English privateers such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake, whose attacks on Spanish ships and settlements in the New World in the 1560s and 1570s did much to fuel the hostility of Spain. Beginning with the *Dreadnought* in 1573, English galleons were constructed to a “race-built” design that reduced top-weight, increased maneuverability, and, above all, allowed them to be armed with large batteries of heavy cannon. Unlike earlier warships, which carried a motley assortment of guns and were

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designed for grappling and boarding enemy vessels, the new English ships were intended to pound and sink their targets from a distance. These galleons were arguably the highest tech weapons of the day. By the 1580s, Elizabeth had the most powerful navy in Europe and her naval commanders (especially Drake) were increasingly confident in their ability to defeat any fleet mustered by Spain. Indeed, if the winds had blown the right way, the famous showdown against Spain's *Gran Armada* in 1588 would have been fought off the Spanish coast, not within sight of the cliffs of Dover.⁶

In the wake of its famous victory in 1588, England launched a succession of counter-armadas of its own against Spain. An expedition to Portugal in 1589, which almost rivaled Spain's force of the previous year in size, proved just as disastrous as its Spanish counterpart. More successful was a 1596 expedition that resulted in the brief occupation of the key Spanish port of Cádiz. The departure of such large fleets must have been as spectacular as the image conjured up by the Chorus at the start of act 3 of *Henry V*:

Oh, do but think
 You stand upon the rivage and behold
 A city on th'inconstant billows dancing,
 For so appears this fleet majestic. (3.0.13–16)

Nevertheless, despite the dramatic paintwork and bristling firepower of Elizabeth's warships, the limitations of sixteenth-century technology meant that naval operations were always vulnerable to storms and shipborne disease. During the years of open war against Spain after 1585, ambitious plans for English fleets to blockade the Spanish coast, intercept Spanish treasure fleets in the Azores, or seize key Spanish bases in the New World all consistently failed to deliver on the grand promises of the commanders who promoted them. Even the famous victory at Cádiz proved short-lived and provoked yet another failed Spanish attempt to invade England. Indeed, the resurgence of Spanish naval power in the 1590s meant that England endured new failed armadas in 1596 and 1597, as well as a costly false alarm (the "Invisible Armada") in 1599. Although Elizabeth relied upon her fleet as the realm's first line of defense, the queen ultimately became almost as frustrated as Philip of Spain with the results of costly long-range naval operations.⁷ Royal officials, however, from the Lord Admiral down, continued to make a financial killing from the huge private industry of legalized piracy – privateering – which brought huge quantities of money and exotic goods into England.⁸

In contrast to its years of steady investment in the royal fleet, the efforts of Elizabeth's government to modernize the realm's land defenses, which also stepped up in the 1570s, proved slow, difficult, and incomplete. Armies in

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Tudor England were traditionally constructed from the private retinues of aristocrats, bishops, and courtiers, or from the county militias. The only standing forces in England paid for by the crown itself were garrisons at some royal fortresses (the largest being at Berwick on the Scottish border), the royal guard, and the elite courtly band of Gentlemen Pensioners. Unlike royal warships, which the queen herself owned and maintained, the majority of land power was controlled by the gentlemen who governed the counties and the merchant councils that oversaw the realm's leading towns and cities. Modernizing such a plethora of land forces therefore depended upon inspiring or cajoling the local political elites into action and requiring them to spend their own money (and that of their neighbors and tenants) on equipping and supplying their militias – and to continue doing so, year after year. This was a monumental task which the Privy Council pursued on behalf of the queen over the course of several decades.

Older histories, taking their cue from the characters of Justices Shallow and Silence, tend to portray this effort in a rather negative light. Based upon such judgments, it has been suggested that England's militias would have had little chance of defeating a Spanish landing if an armada had succeeded in evading or defeating the English fleet.⁹ However, recent studies have advanced a more positive assessment.¹⁰ To be sure, the state of county militias was variable and the readiness of individual counties waxed and waned over time but the broader picture suggests remarkable improvements in England's ability to mobilize defensive land forces quickly and effectively by the late 1580s. This was an extraordinary, but underappreciated, administrative and political achievement. Yet, like the consistently heavy spending on the navy, the constant pressure on counties to train and equip their militias ultimately proved impossible to sustain once the war with Spain wound down after Elizabeth's death in 1603.¹¹ When England returned to war again under Charles I in the 1620s, his efforts were not only burdened with expectations inflated by nostalgic recollections of Elizabeth's reign but also crippled by two decades of underinvestment after the queen's death.

One of the prime drivers for modernizing the county militias was a desire to retire England's traditional infantry weapons, the longbow and the bill, and to replace them with the pike and the arquebus (called the caliver in England), and its heavier cousin, the musket. Although the longbow had been central to a tactical system that gave England remarkable military success since the early 1300s, it seemed increasingly outdated by Elizabeth's reign. This decline of the longbow in Shakespeare's time is evident in the recruitment scene in *2 Henry IV*. Although any English army in 1405 would have contained many archers, the only mention of the longbow here is that "old Double," who "drew a good bow" and "shot a

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fine shot,” is reported dead, even though Justice Shallow immediately forgets this fact (3.2.37–41). Pointedly, none of the potential recruits for Falstaff are bowmen. Critics have suggested that Shakespeare’s conspicuous downplaying of the longbow in his plays – even in *Henry V*, which celebrates the victory at Agincourt, which was only won because of the longbow – may reflect a conscious rejection of the militarist nostalgia evoked in works such as Holinshed’s *Chronicles*.¹²

Whether or not Shakespeare intended some kind of implied criticism of jingoist histories of England’s glorious military past, the recruitment scene in 2 *Henry IV* can be seen as simply reflecting the military reality of Shakespeare’s own time. When questioned by Shallow, Falstaff justifies his unimpressive selection of recruits by dismissing the need for tall and strong men: “Care I for the limb, the thews, the stature, bulk, and big assemblance of a man? . . . Oh, give me the spare men, and spare me the great ones!” (3.2.233–43). According to Falstaff, what mattered was “spirit” and even men such as “ragged” Thomas Wart could “manage” a caliver – a weapon that did not exist in 1405 but was mandated for widespread use in Elizabeth’s reign. While comically expressed, Falstaff’s boasting about his expertise in choosing men for war touched upon historical reality. In skilled hands, a Tudor warbow was a formidable weapon.¹³ Justice Shallow claims that “old Double” had been able to hit a bullseye at 240 yards and could still hit a larger target 40 or 50 yards beyond that (3.2.42–45). Judging by the longbows and skeletons of archers recovered from Henry VIII’s warship *Mary Rose*, which sank in 1545, such claims may not have been fanciful. Tudor warbows had an immense draw-weight and the physical strength needed to use them effectively is evident in the size and distinctive skeletal deformation of the archers’ remains. Nevertheless, battlefield reports suggest that the longbow’s military effectiveness was patently declining by the 1540s. Despite shooting farther and much faster than any gun, the crucial weakness of the weapon was its utter dependence upon the health and long years of training of individual archers. Men who could shoot a great warbow were always in limited supply, even before the physical impact of an extended campaign took its toll. This meant that there was a hard limit to the number of bowmen England could muster and serious losses in their ranks could not easily be replaced. By contrast, raw recruits could rapidly be trained to use guns or pikes, dramatically expanding the pool of militarily useful manpower. Beginning in the sixteenth century, European armies therefore began to expand as mass-produced weapons were issued to mass-produced soldiers and the immediate limits on army size instead became money, logistics, and governmental administration.

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Elizabeth's government soon recognized that reequipping all of England's county militias was impossible. Beginning in the early 1570s, the Privy Council therefore required counties to select a proportion of their men – supposedly the best men – and to equip only them with modern weapons. Crucially, these forces were expected to receive (relatively) regular training: initially, ten days a year, spread over three brief camps. The cost of the new weapons, the wages of the soldiers and their officers during training camps, and the gunpowder that was expended in target practice were to be borne by the county community itself. This smaller, modernized version of the county militias became known as the trained bands. Compelling the county communities to act on this plan and make their trained bands into militarily useful fighting forces was a slow and painful process, especially in inland counties such as Gloucestershire that seemed reassuringly distant from any immediate threat. Progress was driven by endless hectoring letters from the Council to local JPs and charted in a sea of paperwork, often returned by county officials in maddeningly variable and incomplete form. In 1577, for example, there were officially 9,821 able men in the county of Gloucestershire, of whom 2,485 were described as “hable men selected,” but only 1,139 of them were “hable men furnished.” Most of the latter were still armed with longbows and bills. A mere eighty-three men were described as equipped with calivers or handguns.¹⁴ As Patricia Cahill has noted, the Elizabethan regime's remorseless gathering of detailed information on the military resources of the counties is evident even in the bumbling of Justices Shallow and Silence.¹⁵ Shallow uses a muster roll (“Where's the roll?” he asks three times [3.2.90]) to check off the potential draftees by name. After Shadow, Wart, and Feeble were “pricked” for service, their names would also have been listed in a formal indenture that placed them under the authority of Falstaff as a legally deputed recruiting officer of the crown.

Muster rolls, and the numerical summaries based upon them that were certified to the Privy Council, show that most other counties (and especially the City of London) were far better equipped than backward Gloucestershire. Even so, serious progress in military preparedness was most evident after England finally entered into open war with Spain in 1585, when Elizabeth sent English troops to avert a Dutch defeat in the Low Countries. Experienced captains, many of whom had previously served as mercenaries in the Low Countries, were appointed to every county as muster-masters to oversee the preparation of the trained bands. Perhaps even more important was the appointment of lord lieutenants for each county. Typically a nobleman, the lord lieutenant was deputed to oversee all aspects of military administration for his county and to lead its combined trained bands in times of war. Many of the lord lieutenants appointed in 1585–86 were also members of the

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Privy Council, which gave the Council a very direct connection to the military preparedness and internal security of key counties across the realm.¹⁶ As reports of Spanish preparations for an invasion of England grew after 1586, the Council consistently stepped up the pressure on counties to strengthen their trained bands. The city of Gloucester, which was jurisdictionally distinct from the county, finally set up its own trained band in 1586, when 300 men were chosen and “dyverse tymes trained.” In 1587, the city spent £37 on powder for training. In 1588, the city’s expenditure on powder grew to a hefty £112.¹⁷ During the same period, the county of Gloucestershire certified that 11,700 “hable men” remained outside the trained bands. The latter now comprised 3,000 men (actually 3,020), in 12-foot bands, with 1,140 men armed with calivers, 300 men armed with muskets, and 600 with pikes. However, 485 men were still armed with longbows and 495 with bills. There were also two horse companies, comprising 160 light horsemen (armed with swords and pistols) and forty heavy lancers.¹⁸

In many counties, the creation of the trained bands saw jockeying among local gentlemen – especially JPs of the sort represented by Shallow and Silence – to ensure that they would command men drawn from their own “country.” The smaller forces and regular training raised the stakes for these gentlemen, who felt their local eminence required them to hold a captaincy in the trained bands. Since many gentlemen were inexperienced in war, and particularly in the deployment of guns and pikes, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century saw a mini boom in military manuals aimed at gentleman officers.¹⁹ The local politics of military command were further complicated by the Council’s appointment of the muster-masters, many of whom were outsiders to the county community and were insistent that their own military expertise should be treated with deference by local gentlemen, even by those of more illustrious lineage. That the county was required to pay the hefty salary of these outsiders added salt to the wounded pride of many county elites. The Council was regularly forced to intervene and settle disputes.

Despite such problems, the system of trained bands proved surprisingly efficient in most counties during the great armada crisis of 1588 and in the 1590s. In Devon, training in the spring of 1598 was carefully spread over eighteen days at eleven different locations to minimize the time soldiers spent away from home. When the false alarm of the “Invisible Armada” occurred in August 1599, the county mobilized its trained bands ahead of schedule and held them ready for action even as the summer harvest remained ungathered. The cost was a massive £300 a day. By the time the false alarm was over, Devon had allegedly spent more than £10,000 from local funds – an eye-watering amount.²⁰ During the same false alarm, Cambridgeshire

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was able to have 500 foot soldiers and fifty cavalries on the road to London within two days of the Council's order for mobilization. The county authorities there also raised £620 to cover the cost of the effort.²¹ Such examples show how quickly the trained bands could respond in a crisis. However, the very heavy costs associated with the training, equipment, and extended mobilizations of these forces also demonstrate how burdensome the system could be on the queen's subjects. It should be noted that the many collections of money for the trained bands and other local military expenses were in addition to the regular national taxes authorized by Parliament.

The creation of the trained bands in the 1570s also had major implications for the campaigns that England fought in Ireland and on the Continent in the final three decades of Elizabeth's reign. The manpower and equipment of the trained bands were explicitly reserved for home defense. This meant that troops for service overseas had to be raised by other means and from other sources of manpower. Although some men volunteered for military service abroad, the basic model of recruitment followed that shown with Shallow, Silence, and Falstaff in 2 *Henry IV*. When fresh troops were needed, the Privy Council allocated specific numbers to individual counties, where local JPs were responsible for mustering suitable men, from whom the required number would be conscripted ("pressed") by deputy lieutenants or other local officials. The men would be given uniforms and arms (although policy on the latter sometimes varied) and entrusted to a local gentleman or (more commonly) a captain nominated by the Council, who would "conduct" them to their designated port of embarkation. The county would subsequently be reimbursed at the Exchequer in Westminster for the cost of equipping and marching the men to their rendezvous according to a standard rate ("coat and conduct money"). For example, in June 1598, the Privy Council ordered the Earl of Pembroke, Lord President of Wales, to raise 1,200 men for service in Ireland. Pembroke, in turn, sent orders to his deputy lieutenants in each Welsh county, specifying the numbers they were required to meet. The target for Caernarvonshire was set at 100 men. On July 4, the deputy lieutenants there wrote to JPs in the county requiring that they "geve openn soomones and proclamacion" in "all churches, markettes and places of assemblie within your jurisdiction" for all men aged between sixteen and seventy to assemble at Caernarvon by 9 a.m. on July 12 "to bee vewed, mustered and sett forth for this her Majeste's service as apperteineth."²² The JPs were also expected to raise money locally to pay for the levy. Indeed, between March 1599 and December 1602, Caernarvonshire received eleven separate demands for soldiers to serve in Ireland. In all, these levies involved dispatching 420 men out of the county and cost its inhabitants £1,607.²³ During the same period, the City of London was required to provide 2,675

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men for Ireland, 4,800 men for the defense of Ostend, twelve ships, and two oared galleys, at a combined cost of at least £19,857.²⁴

The comedic recruitment process dramatized in *2 Henry IV* was thus a procedure that would have been extremely familiar to Shakespeare and his audience. Indeed, Shakespeare had also alluded to the very same procedure in *1 Henry IV*, when Falstaff boasted to the audience that

I have misused the King's press damnably. I have got in exchange of a hundred and fifty soldiers, three hundred and odd pounds. I press me none but good householders, yeoman's sons; inquire me out contracted bachelors, such as had been asked twice on the banns, such a commodity of warm slaves as had lief hear the devil as a drum, such as fear the report of a caliver worse than a struck fowl or a hurt wild duck. . . . And such have I to fill up the rooms of them as have bought out their services that you would think that I had a hundred and fifty tattered prodigals lately come from swine-keeping, from eating draff and husks. (4.2.12–32)

Some of the humor of the recruitment scene in *2 Henry IV* was therefore that it directly presented a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of Falstaff's admitted abuse of "the King's press" in the previous *Henry IV* play. Nevertheless, there is an oddity about these evocations of military recruitment. In both plays, the purpose of raising soldiers was to defeat domestic rebellions but they both portray an Elizabethan mechanism for raising men specifically for service overseas. In Shakespeare's time, a domestic rebellion would instead be countered by calling upon the private retinues of peers, courtiers, and senior clergy or by mobilizing the trained bands of counties adjacent to the rebellion.

Shakespeare presumably satirized the "press" in the *Henry IV* plays, despite their focus on domestic wars, because this was an all-too-regular feature of late-Elizabethan life and because abuses of the procedure offered rich comic potential. However, in addition to its potential for corruption, the compulsory levying of men for service abroad from among the "able men" who were excluded from the trained bands raised political and legal concerns. Indeed, the process was arguably illegal. This concern began to surface in the mid-1590s. In Caernarvonshire, JPs refused to proceed with a levy in March 1596, "though for the furtheraunce of her Majestie's service," because the order seemed to lack proper authority.²⁵ Even more dramatic was Sir John Smythe's tirade at a muster of the Essex trained bands at Colchester in June 1596. Smythe proclaimed that "there are traitors aboute the Court, and the Lord Treasurer is a traitor, yea, a traitor of traitors." He claimed that 9,000 men had been "consumed . . . foolishly" in foreign wars and "that there are as many menn slayne and lyeng upon heapes about the