

## Seminar Abstracts Staging Soldiers, SAA 2025, Boston

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### **“Words Before Blows”: Ethical Soldiering in Julius Caesar**

In Julius Caesar, the ideal soldier is not simply an obedient body. By comparing a soldier to his horse, “a creature that I teach to fight” (4.1.33-35), Mark Antony treats soldiers as “fierce fiery warriors” (2.2.19) whose “corporal motion” is to be “governed,” “taught and trained” (4.2.37, 39). However, characters like Titinius, Lucilius, Clitus, and Dardanus complicate Antony’s view of soldierly identity by sacrificing themselves for the commonwealth, prioritizing their friends, and refusing unethical orders. Thus, the play distorts the notion of soldiers as mere physical pawns and instead reconceptualizes effective soldiering via meditative reasoning, discursive leadership, and brotherly friendship. Becoming “a better soldier” (4.3.56) entails acting like “the thinking officer,” who possesses the “mental flexibility” to be “comfortable in the ambiguity and uncertainty of modern combat” (Reeves and Barsuhn). “Most like a soldier” (5.5.85), Brutus serves as an exemplary “thinking officer” because in their civil crisis he is meditative, wise, “armed so strong in honesty” (4.3.76), and values “words before blows” (5.1.28). Despite his political title and military rank, Brutus, like Cassius and other officers, is a soldier first and that means thinking altruistically, ethically, and compassionately before acting. In theory, Julius Caesar’s soldiers are defined primarily by their character. But in practice, able-bodiedness, race, gender, or class determine one’s access and success in soldiership.

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### **The Wayward Conscripts of Robert Wilson’s *Cobbler’s Prophecy***

Elizabethan discussions of soldiery near-unanimously hope for training and discipline. Robert Barret in his 1598 *Theorique and Practike of Modern Warres* advocates for soldiers both learned and practiced. Barret nevertheless concedes that the imperfect soldier, too, is up to the task. Barret advises that recruiters eschew the seemingly-apt “fawning flatrerer, the audacious prater, the subtill make-shift” for “the silent man, the approued person, or the plaine dealing fellow” (A4). “[A]lthough his abilitie be not able to attaine all; yet unto some: *some [good parts] better then fewe, fewe better then none at all*” ([B1v]). Illustrating Barret’s wisdom, Robert Wilson’s 1594 play *Cobbler’s Prophecy*, a sprawling mock epic, stages a military success won thanks to a noisy, unapproved, but plain-dealing couple, Rafe and Zelota Cobbler. Initially conscripted for prophetic duty by god Mercury, Rafe and Zelota serve alongside veteran soldier Sateros. Their homeland Boeotia is at risk due to degradation of public spheres by the vice character Olygoros, oligarchy, thinly disguised as Contempt or Content. Olygoros patronizes all of higher rank: Emnius Courtier, Countrey Gentleman, and Scholar. Although Sateros recognizes the threat, his military discipline precludes action so long as Boeotia’s Duke entertains Olygoros’s clients. Precisely because they lack status and discipline, the cobbling couple promptly topple Olygoros and his closest associate Emnius Courtier. Rafe rouses Mars against Olygoros, and Zelota

assassinates Emnius. Now free to act, Sateros leads Rafe with a crew of convicts against first Olygoros Contempt and then invading Argives and Thessalians. Although swathed in allegory, this is a variant of the history play branch that Patricia Cahill identifies with *A Larum for London*, a simultaneously traumatically-daunting and militarily-inspiring call to arms. Wilson's *Cobbler's Prophecy* threatens destruction from within at the hands of Boeotia's own oligarchically-inclined aristocracy and gentry. Indeed, as Steven Gunn cautions, when turning outward on war-footing, early modern authorities had with equal focus to eye internal power-brokers. "Populations had to be kept armed and local militias organized for self-defence during wars sanctioned by the state, but this enabled arms, experience, and even militia structures to be turned against the authorities" (eds. Tallett and Trim). Into this fray, enters Wilson's plain-dealing citizen-soldiers, the perfectly suited cobblers-at-arms.

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### **Soldiership and Shakespeare's Audiences**

How did English playgoers conceive of "soldiership," a word apparently coined just before the birth of the professional theater in England, and how would they have interpreted soldiership on stage? This paper explores the observations and experiences the audience members would have brought with them to the theater. Since England had no standing professional army, a large number of playgoers were trained in the militia. Some of them would have been members of the Trained Bands, who received (as the name implies) higher levels of training, and were called upon more frequently to keep order and defend their communities. They and other members of the audience would have distinguished between soldiering and the use of force "beneath the military horizon": i.e., they would not have considered mobs or hired gangs to be classified with military units, even if they were made up of non-professionals. By the turn of the seventeenth century, thousands of Englishmen had served in military campaigns in the British Isles and continental Europe, and thus had survived real combat. Other workers would have contributed to the military industry centered on the Tower of London. And taxpayers supported the militia and Royal Navy through their purses. Shakespeare presumed this widespread social knowledge as he wove soldiership in various ways into most of his works.

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### **A Touching of Women and Transgender Soldiers: An Examination of Shakespeare's Joan**

Ancient Greek literature and history writings recorded and mythologized the Amazon as an origin figure for woman warriors through various storytelling methods, which have been repeated and reimagined with such continuity that to refer to an "Amazon" in the sixteenth century was to refer to a woman warrior or woman soldier and to mythologize them. Walter Penrose's book, *Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature*, addresses this gap between the mythological Amazon and the historical

Amazon and illuminates how Shakespeare's source material for "Amazons" came into creation. Within *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare provides an interpretation of a famous Amazon, Hippolyta, inspired by Greek and Roman myth and history writings. As a warrior woman, she is abused into submission and made into someone to be acted upon. In Part 1 of *Henry VI*, Pucelle, Shakespeare's imagining of Joan of Arc, is deemed an "Amazon" (1.2.106) due to her martial prowess that separates her from behaving as a woman while still being deemed a "woman" (1.2.150) by her physical aesthetic. Initially a military leader for the French armies and praised for her warrior abilities, she is taken prisoner by the English and is eventually burned at the stake. In both of their captures, Hippolyta and Pucelle weaponize love in their attempts to regain power from those that have othered them – but neither do. The gendered expectations of women to be won or manipulated through love reveal why acts of "love" for women warriors endanger them and remove their warrior status. I argue that at the center of the soldierly identity of women soldiers upon Shakespeare's stage is the experience of fixed failure enacted through love with limited agency. Shakespeare's reimagining of the Amazon figure and their relationship to the woman soldier, in combination with the work of Penrose, further reveals how deeply the interpreted Greek myths instilled a barrier for women soldiers to find resolution without defeat both on and off the stage.

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### **Unseaming and Unseemly: Macbeth's Extraordinary Violence**

It is one of the most grisly descriptions of combat in the canon—a wounded soldier reports that Macbeth has killed the rebel Macdonald and "unseamed him from the navel to th' chops" (1.2.22). *Unseamed*, used only here in Shakespeare, has long drawn the attention of critics seeking to understand how combat shapes Macbeth. Wiley Maley, Alan Warren Friedman, and others often point to moments like this to suggest that Macbeth's battlefield experiences are such that we should think of the character as suffering from a kind of PTSD. While unquestionably describing war's brutality, *unseamed* points to another danger, one spiritual rather than corporeal. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, *unseamed* was more often used adjectively to describe the coat worn by Christ at the Crucifixion than hand-to-hand combat. Indeed, Christ's seamless garment, the one for which the soldiers cast lots during the execution, was often employed as a metaphor for the unity of the church, a condition threatened by schismatics and heretics alike. *Unseamed* anticipates the violence Macbeth will commit when he rends the body of Duncan, God's anointed, pointing, not only to the physical violence of the regicide, but the spiritual crisis that will follow in its wake.