Military culture of Shakespeare's England

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Abstract

This thesis examines the development of military culture in, and its effects on, early modern English society. Militarism during the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods was not reinforced by military institutions directly interfering with the private lives of individuals, or by controlling the thoughts and actions of the whole nation. It was, however, strongly influenced by the culture of a military elite, represented by leading noblemen such as Leicester, Sidney, Essex, and Prince Henry, who paid considerable attention to the theatrical aspects of formal and ceremonial occasions and how their military role was portrayed in art and literature.

Unlike the usual traditional portrayal of these prominent figures as incompetent military leaders who rushed blindly forwards in pursuit of military glory, we will see that through their aristocratic patronage of various art forms they promoted their image as competent Protestant warriors, and helped the public to be receptive to a variety of military ideas.

The principal motivation of this study is to consider a multiplicity of perspectives on how a military culture was constructed, through a variety of genres, and how particular views on military matters were integrated into popular culture. Literary critics and historians have previously examined certain aspects of militarism in this period but this study aims to take a holistic view of how the military culture developed and affected the public sphere.

Type of Work: Ph.D. thesis.
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School/Faculty: Colleges (2008 onwards) > College of Arts & Law
Department: School of English, Drama and American & Canadian Studies, Shakespeare Institute
Subjects: PN2000 Dramatic representation, The Theater
PR English literature
Institution: University of Birmingham
ID Code: 2976

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The culture of England is sometimes difficult to separate clearly from the culture of the United Kingdom, so influential has English culture been on the cultures of the British Isles and, on the other hand, given the extent to which other cultures have influenced life in England. From the relatively tiny island in the North Atlantic, England has influenced virtually every other nation in the world. There is no specifically British national costume. In England, certain military uniforms such as the Beefeater or the Queen’s Guard are considered to be symbolic of Englishness, though they are not official national costumes. William Shakespeare, chief figure of the English Renaissance, is here seen in the Chandos portrait.