

A Farewell to Arms: Classical Precedents in Early Modern England

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I. Introduction

Farewell to arms, or leaving the battle field behind along with all your youthful illusions about military glory and of the honor of "pro patria mori" (dying for your fatherland), has a longer history than the famous novel by Ernest Hemingway. Like so many other things in American literature and culture, they originate across the Atlantic, in early modern England. This essay seeks to outline that rarely acknowledged tradition in the English literary canon of the muse scoffing at Mars, rather than singing the epic feats of brave warriors. By taking such excursion to literary history we may have a better sense of the essentially peace-loving nature of the British, despite their reputation for being belligerent colonizers. That the British fought wars constantly throughout history may not be denied, and that they fought them well deserves proper acknowledgment. Yet the

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British Isles, compared with continental Europe, suffered less from the brutalities of war. Such relative immunity from the violence and devastation of war is reflected in some of the celebrated works of English classics, as we seek to illustrate in what follows.

II. Pericles and the “Wanderer”

The roots of literary pacifism, in fact, go way beyond early modern England. For purposes of comparison let us start from the sun-bathed Mediterranean world at the height of classical Greek civilization. In the famous funeral speech of Pericles, as reported or reconstructed by Thucydides, during the second Peloponnesian War (the winter of BC. 431–30), the Athenian leader seeks to convince the parents whose sons have sacrificed their lives to defend their *polis* that their sons have died a worthy death: they died for the unique Athenian liberty which they helped preserve from the threat of Spartan tyranny. Moreover, they shunned cowardice to gain eternal fame:

More desirable to them than this [“enjoyment of wealth”] was to match their enemies in battle; this they thought the noblest hazard of war, and sought to face it and avenge themselves, and so pursue their aims. Success was unsure, and they left it to hope. Upon deeds they relied for what lay before them, believing that salvation rested rather in action at whatever cost than in surrender. They fled from a name, the name of dishonour, enduring the reality of bodily action, and in one critical instant, at the height of glory, not of fear, they passed away. (Thucydides 36–37)

All the standard notions of military virtue are condensed in this passage: achieving honor and fame via “the noblest hazard of war,” particularly when “[s]uccess was unsure,” triumphing in the last instance not so much over the enemy per se as over “dishonour” by perishing “at the height of glory.”

In contrast to such praise of bidding farewell to life at the glorious battlefield, we have the elegiac lament of an aged warrior, as sung by the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet, who wanders about in his decrepitude “a man who has no beloved protectors” and “removed from [his] homeland, far from dear kinsmen.” Gone are the days of his vigorous fights, gone are the celebrations of hard-won victories, and above all, he lingers on leading his weary life, unknown, unsung, and unaccompanied: “[T]he wounds are deeper in his heart, sore for want of his dear one.” His sorrow renews itself as the memory of his kinsmen passes through his mind: “[H]e greets them with glad words, eagerly looks at them, a company of warriors. Again they fade, moving off over the water; the spirit of these fleeting ones brings to him no familiar voices” (“Wanderer” 69). The soulful cry of the ancient warrior echoes back to him with hollow emptiness:

Where has the horse gone? Where the young warrior?
Where is the giver of treasure? What has become of the
feasting seats? Where are the joys of the hall? Alas, the bright
cup! Alas, the mailed warrior! [...] The ash-spear’s might has
borne the earls away—weapons greedy for slaughter, Fate the
mighty. (70)

In this wintry picture of the obverse side of military career, so different in its temperature and temperament from the sunny speech of Pericles, nothing is left but the melancholy awareness of the futility of battles and the emptiness of the pursuits of glory. The motif of bidding farewell to arms which this earliest example shows thus strikes a distinctive keynote

in the English literary tradition, which, as in so many other things, blossoms in the works of the great Bard.

III. Othello and Falstaff

An obvious fact about Shakespeare's Othello, which tends to get less attention than it deserves due to the hero's skin color, is his status as a hired military professional serving the Venetian Republic. Whatever reward and honor he enjoys in Venice, he has earned hard in the innumerable battles he had fought on land and on sea. Othello is loved by his employers for his ever reliable courage and merits as a man of arms. A daughter of a leading Venetian statesman also feels attracted to him for the same reason:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
 Still questioned me the story of my life
 From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes
 That I have passed.
 I ran it through, even from my boyish days
 To the very moment that he bade me tell it
 [.....]
 This to hear
 Would Desdemona seriously incline;
 But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
 Which ever as she could with haste dispatch
 She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
 Devour up my discourse. (*Othello* I.3.127–32, 144–49)

Thus the fatal love began as a love of the warlike moor and his stories of

military daring, which moreover remained a major component of Desdemona's affection for her husband, as can be seen in her resolution to follow Othello to Cyprus, the frontline in Venice's war with the Turks: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. / So that, dear lords, if I be left behind / A moth of peace, and he go to the war, / The rites for which I love him are bereft me, / And I a heavy interim shall support / By his dear absence" (I.3.248–55). Had she refrained from having her will, the tragedy would have been prevented.

Yet by accompanying Othello to the battle, she makes herself vulnerable as a young lady in an all-male world of violence, intrigue, and rough justice. What happened to the newly-wed couple at Cyprus need not be repeated. What Othello says when he begins to be torn apart by jealousy is worth being quoted, for it surely is the first eloquent valediction to military glory:

O, now for ever
 Farewell the plume'd troops, and the big wars
 That makes ambition virtue—O farewell!
 Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
 The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
 The royal banner, and all quality,
 Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
 And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
 Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
 Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone. (3.3.348–58)

The choice of words is precise and conclusive: Othello's "occupation," his professional identity is now forfeit, for by being cuckolded by his wife (as he suspects), his masculinity which fuels his martial spirit is irrecoverably

soiled. Obviously the logic is faulty: a cheating wife is one thing, your public career is another. The absent middle ground of this syllogism, then, is supplied by the implicit agreement between the playwright and his audience that the “glorious war” and its “pomp” is not that glamorous at all—not in any case potent enough to compensate for your connubial misfortune. In a different culture and a different setting, the follower of Mars may very well cut losses, pack off his false spouse back home, and stick to his professional career. The fact that Othello’s private affairs lead straight to not only to a rupture in his public military career but to a “now for ever / Farewell” can only be understood in cultural terms, of a culture that generally disapproves of bragging military ambition.

Frequently in Shakespeare war or battle forms an integral part of the plot; rarely, however, the battle scenes are enacted on stage. It all happens off stage, while on stage we see the human face of the warriors and the warmongers, such as the tormented soul Othello reveals in the passage quoted above. Moreover, Shakespeare reveals the underside of the very business of warfare itself. Behind and beneath the “the neighing steed and the shrill trump, / The spirit—stirring drum, th’ear—piercing fife” suffer the foot soldiers either bought with cash or pressed into service to do the menial work of killing and being killed. Falstaff in his capacity as a recruiting captain treats the audience to a vivid picture of how he made good use of the King’s purse in raising his army for the historic battle of Shrewsbury:

If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I am a soused gurnet; 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, yeomen’s sons, inquire me out contracted bachelors, such as had been asked twice on the banns, such a commodity of warm slaves as had

as 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. I pressed me none but such toasts—and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads, and they have bought out their services; and now my whole charge consists of ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies—slaves as ragged as Lazarus in the painted cloth, where the glutton's dogs licked his sores: and such as indeed were never soldiers, but discarded unjust servingmen, younger sons to younger brothers, revolted tapsters, and ostlers trade-fallen, the cankers of a calm world and a long peace, ten times more dishonourable—ragged than an old fazed ancient; 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.
(1 *Henry IV*, 4.2.11–36)

War is simply good business for the jolly gentleman. He first spends the sum given him as recruitment fund to get hold of those who can afford to purchase their freedom, apparently paying Falstaff more than the soldier's wage they received. Pocketing the kickback, Falstaff goes on to buy cheap, ragged, and dubious recruits hardly fit for battle.²⁾ Soon he meets the King's son and heir, Hal, between whom and Falstaff the following dialogue takes place:

Prince: ... [B]ut tell me, Jack, whose fellows are these that come after?

Fal: Mine, Hal, mine.

1) Nor is he particularly distorting the facts here, as Frank Tallett points out: "he [Falstaff] had a point, for every army drafted in its full complement of under-sized, weak, sick and deformed men, wholly unsuited to withstand the rigours of army life" (Tallett 108).

Prince: I did never see such pitiful rascals.

Fal: Tut, tut, good enough to toss, food for powder, food for powder, they'll fill a pit as well as better; tush, man, mortal men, mortal men. (4.2.61–67)

Whatever the kings and princes might say to embellish their lust for blood and land, their army, according to Falstaff, is nothing more than “food for powder” destined to die in droves and to be thrown into the pit.

Falstaff's irreverence towards military solemnity, so refreshing in its bluntness, celebrates cowardice instead of courage, as he praises his recruits in *2 Henry IV*: “[T]his same half-faced fellow Shadow; give me this man, he presents no mark to the enemy—the foeman may with as great aim level at the edge of a penknife. And for a retreat, how swiftly will this Feeble the woman's tailor run off! O, give me the spare men, and spare me the great ones” (*2 Henry IV*, 3.2.260–65). The spare men—both in the sense of being expendable spare parts and of being meager in shape—would do just as well for Falstaff, for fighting a glorious battle for your king or for eternal fame is something he has no taste for. After all, as far as he sees it, valor in action is a mere effect of drunkenness: “It[wine] illumineth the face, which, as a beacon, gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm; and then the vital commoners, and inland petty spirits, muster me all to their captain, the heart; who, great and puffed up with this retinue, doth any deed of courage; and this valour comes of sherris. So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack, for that sets it a-work, and learning a mere hoard of gold kept by a devil, till sack commences it and sets it in act and use” (*2 Henry IV*, 4.3.106–115). Through such learned argument on the true nature of “mortal men,” Falstaff lampoons masculine military dignity and discipline. Between Othello's sublime obituary to his military career and Falstaff's sardonic

disquisition on the vacuity of military glory, Shakespeare puts paid to the classic world of epic heroism.

To underscore the distinctively English attitude to war that Shakespeare's Falstaff so eloquently voices, it would be useful to leave England for a while and visit Spain, the main adversary of England during Shakespeare's lifetime. The hardships of the common soldier, which Shakespeare merely hints at, are more vividly described by his contemporary Cervantes, who quite uniquely among the men of letters had spent a good part of his life fighting his king's battles, most famously, even losing one hand in the historic Battle of Lepanto. In one of Don Quixote's more sober moments, he compares the abject poverty of the soldier with that of the scholar:

Since in speaking of the scholar, we began with his poverty, and its several branches, let us see whether the soldier be richer. And we shall find that poverty itself is not poorer: for he depends on his wretched pay, which comes late, or perhaps never; or else on what he can pilfer, with great peril of his life and conscience. And sometimes his nakedness is such, that his slashed buff doublet serves him both for finery and shirt; and in the midst of winter, being in the open field, he has nothing to warm him but the breath of his mouth, which, issuing from an empty place, must needs come out cold, against all the rules of nature. (*Don Quixote*, Part I. Ch. 38, 340)

Capping the constant suffering the soldier must accept as the routine condition of his life is the deadly reality of battle:

Suppose now the day and hour come of taking the degree of his profession; I say, suppose the day of battle come; and then

his doctoral cap will be of lint, to cure some wound made by a musket shot, which, perhaps, has gone through his temples, or lamed him a leg or an arm. And though this should not happen, but merciful heaven should keep and preserve him alive and unhurt, he shall remain, perhaps, in the same poverty as before; and there must happen a second and a third engagement, and battle after battle, and he must come off victor from them all, to get anything considerable by it. But these miracles are seldom seen. (340)

The effect of these descriptions is to incite the reader's sympathy and respect for the military profession, whose danger and destitution merit our admiration. Death or injury in the battlefield is the consummation of the warrior's destiny, comparable to the scholar taking his degree. In contrast, Shakespeare's Falstaff paints the entire realm of military affairs with satiric colors. Whereas Cervantes seeks to dispel the civilian's prejudice about the military men, Shakespeare thwarts the attempt of those seeking to fabricate and maintain military patriotism, such as Hal and his father.

IV. "Those Devilish Instruments"

In both Shakespeare and Cervantes we find clear indications of the crucial turn in Western military history from the medieval dominance of mounted cavalier to the reliance on fire arms of the grounded infantry and artillery.³⁾ The physical or moral state of the soldier matters little, according to Falstaff, for they are "food for powder." The life of the soldier is made more precarious, according to Don Quixote, due to the unpredictable

3) On the changes in military strategy in the 16th to 17th century, see Tallett 21-31.

“musket shot.” Firearms were indeed the lethal foe of the cavalier for it destroys all that was noble about the medieval battle, as Don Quixote exclaims:

A blessing on those happy ages, strangers to the dreadful fury of those devilish instruments of artillery, whose inventor, I verily believe, is now in hell receiving the reward of his diabolical invention; by means of which it is in the power of a cowardly and base hand to take away the life of the bravest cavalier, and to which is owing, that without knowing how, or from whence, in the midst of resolution and bravery, which inflames and animates gallant spirits, comes a chance ball, shot off by one, who, perhaps, fled and was frightened at the very flash in the pan, and in an instant cuts short and puts an end to the thoughts and life of him who deserved to have lived for many ages. (*Don Quixote* 342)

No longer can courage meet with courage and daring encounter daring, for the “cowardly and base hand” is empowered by the rifle it holds to finish off the gallant lives of the bravest and noblest knights. Since Don Quixote and his author retain their respect for the old chivalric glamour of the armored knight on horseback, Cervantes would see to it that through all the infinite miseries his hero goes through, gunfire would play no role whatsoever. Yet no such minimum respect for chivalric honor was to be expected in the actual war theaters of early modern Europe. Or, to go back to Othello’s speech, the “occupation” of the military man was irrevocably altered due to the “mortal engines” that “counterfeit” Jupiter’s thunder. Even without the machinations of Iago, Othello’s military career could have come to an abrupt end due to the mechanism of the “diabolical invention” of firearms.

In Italy, a land plagued by more or less permanent warfare and in which the latest military machinery was being experimented, Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso* turns back the clock of military history to the early middle ages. Yet traces of early modernity cannot be entirely wiped off. For instance, the poet depicts Orlando banishing and destroying the King of Frisia's "hollow tube" and "firing piece," though not before the devastating potency of the "engine of war" is lucidly visualized:

There was a flash from behind like lightning, and from the front a roar like thunder in the air. The walls shuddered, and the ground underfoot; the heavens echoed to the dreadful sound. The fiery bolt, which smashes and annihilates whatever it meets and spares no one, hissed and screeched. (*Orlando Furioso*, Canto 9, 90)

After taking possession of the engine and its "powder and balls," Orlando throws them to the deep waters with these words: "To ensure that no knight will ever again be intimidated by you, and that no villain will ever again boast himself the equal of a good man because of you, sink here. O cursed, abominable device, constructed by the fiend Beelzebub in the forge of Hades when he planned to bring the world to ruin by you, back to hell from whence you came I consign you" (92). In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is not Beelzebub but his master Satan himself who escalates the arms race with God the Father by moving on to the technological phase of military strategy. Satan's first attempt to defeat the heavenly host failed, but he cheers fellow rebels with these words:

These things, as not to mind from whence they grow
Deep under ground, materials dark and crude,
Of spiritous and fiery spume, till toucht

With Heav'n's ray, and temper'd they shoot forth
So beauteous, op'ning to the ambient light.
These in thir dark Nativity the Deep
Shall yield us, pregnant with infernal flame,
Which into hollow Engines long and round
Thick ramm'd, at th' other bore with touch of fire
Dilated and infuriate shall send forth
From far with thund'ring noise among our foes
Such implements of mischief as shall dash
To pieces, and o'erwhelm whatever stands
Adverse, that they shall fear we have disarm'd
The Thunderer of his only dreaded bolt. (*Paradise Lost*,
Book VI. ll. 477–91)

Having successfully manufactured this new high tech weapon, Satan makes a renewed assault on the heavenly army. Apparently things are going well just as Satan predicted, and the deadly might of Satan's super cannon is truly formidable, as described by Raphael:

Immediate in a flame,
But soon obscur'd with smoke, all Heav'n appear'd,
From those deep-throated Engines belcht, whose roar
Embowell'd with outrageous noise the Air,
And all her entrails tore, disgorging foul
Thir devilish glut, chain'd Thunderbolts and Hail
Of Iron Globes, which on the Victor Host
Levell'd, with such impetuous fury smote,
That whom they hit, none on thir feet might stand,
Though standing else as Rocks, but down they fell
By thousands, Angel on Arch-Angel roll'd. (*Paradise Lost*,
Book VI. ll. 584–94)

Things look bleak indeed for the devastated angels and arch-angels, but Satan's military engineering is outmatched by God's superior artillery. Satan is finally defeated by Son of God's "ten thousand Thunders" (*Paradise Lost*, Book VI. l. 836), which truly has a super-human might: "One Spirit in them rul'd, and every eye / Glar'd lightning, and shot forth pernicious fire / Among th' accurst, that wither'd all thir strength, / And of thir wonted vigor left them drain'd, / Exhausted, spiritless, afflicted, fall'n" (*Paradise Lost*, Book VI. ll. 848-852).

Milton's cosmic civil war reflects in part the earthly Civil War, thanks to which Cromwell came to power. Milton the Latin Secretary of Cromwell must have known how infinitely more mundane and messy the business of warfare was than the sanitized war up in heaven. Moreover, the ethical justification was equally complicated. What to him would be a Godly mission was merely an unjustified rebellion in the eyes of the Royalists, as satanic as that of Milton's Satan depicted in his great epic. Most interestingly the lofty language chosen to envision the battle in heaven suddenly descends to deadpan realism when the poet comes to describe the victims of God's war machine. With their strength all "wither'd" and their "vigor ... drain'd," they flee for their lives "[e]xhausted, spiritless, afflicted, fall'n." At the most ostensible level, Milton is suggesting God's military violence is condoned because it serves a just cause. Such argument would also help Cromwell uphold his righteousness. Yet at the level of style, the poet seems to sympathize with the fallen angels by using such down-to-earth and therefore more emotionally compelling language. A counter argument to the first may have it that to the extent that God had to match brute violence with violence, his infinite benevolence has been compromised. This would rob Cromwell of his claim to divine sanction, or worse, would shoot arrows of doubts at God's righteousness itself. The ambiguity hinted in the overall setting of the

celestial battle in general (for the rebels in that civil war are repelled unlike those who rebelled against Charles I) and in the lines penned by the poet, we sense how much Milton wavers between an ideological vindication of armed revolution and a pacifist reservation about military action of any kind, whether in heaven or on earth. Moreover, put in the context of Cervantes or Ariosto's denigration of the use of fire arms as being in itself "devilish" (and Milton echoes these precedents in the words he chose to depict Satan's artillery), the war tactic of God the Son is bound to appear tainted by the diabolical notion of wiping off your adversary indiscriminately with "thousand thunders" instead of defeating one by one in close encounter.⁴⁾ Military glory for the victor, as well as for the loser, comes as an embarrassment rather than an unalloyed triumph. In any case, the rule of the game has changed ever since. Both for Satan and for the Puritan revolutionaries, it is now farewell once and for all to arms and armed revolt. Satan the proud general has to transform himself into a hideous serpent in order to have his revenge; the blinded rebel poet is cut off from public life and has the meager consolation of ruminating on the failed revolution.

V. Conclusion

From "The Wanderer" to *Paradise Lost*, then, English literature reveals its reluctance to praise military glory. This may not perhaps amount to an unbroken tradition of pacifism, but a consistently negative attitude to war and arms does emerge among the works we have examined in this essay,

4) In fact, Cromwell was keenly aware of the importance of the artillery, rather than the old-fashioned cavalry charge, in his battles with Charles I, as in the Battle of Naseby. See Fuller 97.

which may be taken, given the classical status of the works, to represent a salient feature of English culture in general. Early-modern England, for sure, was as yet a pre-imperialist nation, its relatively modest position in Europe being a far cry from the global power it came to become in the eighteenth century. Yet militarism never quite found home in English literature even in the subsequent centuries. The realistic novel, which emerged a generation or so after Milton, took upon as its task the depiction of the mundane and peaceful business of making and distributing wealth. From Defoe to Hardy, money and marriage dominate the plots. Most tellingly, a captain or a major in a Jane Austen novel is busy making love rather than fighting battles. The poets are not different, either. The eighteenth-century military epic is represented by the mock-epic playfulness of *The Rape of the Lock*. Apart from the obligatory pieces of poet laureates, military glory has been poorly celebrated in English poetry. Arms and letters in English culture stand apart, never quite comfortable in each other's company.

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Abstract

A Farewell to Arms: Classical Precedents in Early Modern England

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Farewell to arms, or leaving the battlefield behind along with the glory of “pro patria mori” (dying for your fatherland), has a long history that can be traced to early modern England, if not earlier. This reflects the essentially peace-loving nature of the British, despite their reputation for being belligerent colonizers. The keynote of desolate melancholy the Anglo-Saxon “Wanderer” strikes is magnified in the jealousy-torn Othello’s anguished repudiation of his military “occupation.” In the sardonic remarks of Falstaff on the business of war mongering, a frontal attack is waged on militarism as such. Even in *Paradise Lost*, the revolutionary career of the author notwithstanding, the depiction of the heavenly civil war betrays a discomfort concerning the violent measures which God, as well as Satan, resorts to. From “The Wanderer” to *Paradise Lost*, English literature reveals its reluctance to praise military glory. This may not perhaps amount to an unbroken tradition of pacifism, but a certain negative attitude to war and arms does emerge in these classics, which represents a characteristic feature of English culture in general.

Key Words: war, battle, early modern England, “The Wanderer,” Shakespeare, Othello, *Othello*, Falstaff, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, Satan, *Paradise Lost*, *Don Quixote*, *Orlando Furioso*.