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English Mercuries: Soldier Poets in the Age of Shakespeare

Adam N. McKeown

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English Mercuries examines war and literature through the writings of veterans who came home from their deployments to pursue literary careers. From their often neglected writings emerges a new picture of the Elizabethan world at war. For centuries Elizabethan England has been characterized by booming patriotism and martial energy, and the literature of this period, epitomized in works like Shakespeare's *Henry V*, has been seen as celebrating a proud and defiant kingdom unified around its wars with Spain. Beneath this patriotic veneer, however, was a country withering under the costs of seemingly endless military commitments and ripped apart by doubts about the purpose of war and mistrust of state officials who advanced their own political interests through war at the expense of the people who had to fight and pay for it.

These misgivings are a powerful undercurrent in much of the literature of the period, even the most ostensibly patriotic works, but it is in the writings on war by soldier poets where they are most clearly pronounced. Fashioning themselves as servants of both Mars and Mercury (the god of war and the god of writing), Elizabethan soldier poets focused their war stories on the gritty realities of military campaigning, the price individuals paid for serving the state, and the difficulties of returning to civilian life. The book reconsiders some familiar writers like John Donne and Ben Jonson in the context of their military experiences and provides comprehensive studies of some important but underappreciated soldier poets like Thomas Churchyard, George Gascoigne, and John Harington.

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