

## ARMOUR AND ARMS IN SHAKESPEARE.

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Many essays have been written by competent authorities on Shakespeare's acquaintance with law, medicine, botany, natural history, and other subjects, but I have not as yet come across any notes as to his knowledge of arms and armour, concerning which numerous passages occur in his dramatic works. It may, therefore, be permitted to note some of his references to such things. We must first remember that his personal history, unlike that of Ben Jonson and some other writers of his day, does not include any military service such as would account for a professional knowledge of arms and armour, and further that in his day armour was rapidly passing out of use. That such was the case we learn from the lament of some of the older soldiers, as on the occasion of Sir Philip Sidney's mortal wound received at Zutphen owing to his having fought without his cuishes or defence for the thighs, either because he had lent them to Sir William Pelham, or because, like so many other Englishmen, he considered the advantages of the wearing of armour to be counterbalanced by the extra weight, heat and other accompaniments of the practice. In 1593 Sir Richard Hawkins, speaking of such matters, says of his sailors, "Yet not a man would use them but esteemed a pott of wine a better defence than an armour of prooffe."

Then again, in considering the notices of arms and armour in Shakespeare's works, allowance must be made for the poetic licence: this has caused numerous anachronisms, and also it should not be forgotten that very often the name by which a piece of armour, and even of a weapon, was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, applied to a very different kind of thing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Shakespeare makes many references to armour as a whole.

In *Measure for Measure*, I, ii, 171, we have unenforced penalties likened to "unscour'd armour hung by the wall," and in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick speaks of the time when Claudio

Would have walked ten mile afoot to see a good armour.

The discomfort attending the wearing of armour is referred to in 2, *Henry IV*, IV, v, 30, where Majesty is said to be

Like a rich armour worn in heat of day,  
That scalds with safety.

The old word "harness" for armour is not often met with in the plays, but

At least we'll die with harness on our back,

in *Macbeth*, is well known.

The poet, however, seldom speaks of the parts of a suit except when the head-piece is introduced, as in 2, *Henry IV*, IV, i, 104,

I saw young Harry, with his bevor on,  
His cuisses on his thighs,

and in a few cases gauntlets are mentioned.

Like Amazons, come tripping after drums; Their thimbles into  
armed gauntlets change.

King John, v, ii, 155.

A scaly gauntlet now with joints of steel  
Must glove this hand.

2, *Henry IV*, I, 145.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii, 171, Ulysses tells how Patroclus at Achilles' desire mimics the aged Nestor,

And with a palsy fumbling on his gorget,  
Shake in and out the rivet.

The familiar expression of "the armourers accomplishing the knights, with busy hammers closing rivets up," in the fine description of the eve of Agincourt, refers of course to the close adjustment of those pieces of the armour which consisted of small plates of metal, sliding when necessary, over other plates, the rivets working in slots. Continual use would make the pieces work loose, and in the preparation for battle the armourer's work was to remedy this, not by driving the rivets home, as is done in modern constructional steelwork, but merely by

tightening them. In *Troilus and Cressida* when Hector says to "*one in sumptuous armour*," v, vi, 29.

I like thy armour well;  
I'll frush it, and unlock the rivets all,

he means that he will bruise and smash it and loosen the rivets.

We may now turn to the instances where head-pieces and their component parts are mentioned.

The portion of a head-piece that has given rise to most discussion is no doubt the bevor as used in *Hamlet*. It will be remembered that *Hamlet* on learning that his father's ghost had been seen "armed from head to foot" says, "Then saw you not his face." Now this may have been said as consequent on the complete armament of the ghost, or it may have been said interrogatively as in the *Globe* edition. On the former supposition, *Horatio's* answer, "O yes, my Lord, he wore his bevor up," is a sort of protest and explanation. In the latter case it is a direct answer to *Hamlet*.

Now the bevor of a helmet was the term used for the chin-piece of the close helmet, and was only moved when the helmet was put on or off, when it would be pushed forward on its pivots to allow of the head being introduced into or withdrawn from the metal box. Evidently in this quotation the bevor did not refer to the chin-piece. In *Troilus and Cressida*, i, iii, 288, *Nestor* says,

I'll hide my silver beard in a gold bevor,

and here the term is used as we should expect and refers to the actual bevor.

Now what was meant by the term in *Hamlet*? It would seem that the visor was understood; if that were raised, the face would be visible.

Again, in *Henry V*, iv, ii, 43, *Grandpré*, speaking of the English horsemen, says

Big Mars seems bankrupt in their beggar'd host,  
And faintly through a rusty bevor peeps.

In 2, *Henry IV*, iv, i, 119, we have

Their neighing coursers daring of the spur,  
Their armed staves in charge, their bevors down,  
Their eyes of fire sparkling through sights of steel.

This clearly refers to the visors lowered for the forward rush in the tournament.

Turning to contemporary writers, Spenser in the *Faërie Queene*, IV, iii, 11, says that Cambell in his fight with Priamond

Pierst through his bevor quite into his brow

And again in VI, 25, Scudamor and Artegal

Their bevors up did reare,

And shew'd themselves to her such as indeed they were,

yet in the fight between Pyrorcles and Guyon, Spenser describes how the latter received a blow that

Made him reel, and to his breast his bevor bent.

Here the chin-piece is clearly indicated.

The foregoing instances would seem to show that Shakespeare, like other poets of his day, often used the term bevor for what we call the visor, but he also used it in some pieces for the whole head-piece, as in the following.

Vernon recounts that :

I saw young Harry with his bevor on.

1, Henry IV, iv, i, 104.

The duke of York says of the duke of Buckingham,

I cleft his bevor with a downright blow ;

3, Henry VI, I, i, 12.

and Richard asks,

What, is my bevor easier than it was ?

Richard III, v, iii, 50.

Again turning to a contemporary writer in E. Fairfax's *Tasso*, printed in 1600, occurs "With trembling hand her bevor he untyed." The last Shakespearian quotation, taken with Fairfax, shows how loosely the term was applied in the poet's day.

Another instance of the careless use of terms is shown in the poem styled *Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterfly*, also by Spenser. Clarion places on his head his glistening burganet,

On which two deadly weapons first he bore,

Strongly outlaunched towards either side,

Like two sharp speares his enemies to gore

Like as a warlike Brigandine applyde to fight

Layes forth her dreadful pikes afore the engines which in them sad death doo hyde.

Now a brigandine was a coat composed of small plates of metal placed between two thicknesses of velvet silk or canvas, and was a flexible and good defensive garment. Spenser's description, however, applies exactly to the Black Carts in which, as may be seen from the drawings of the Cowdray pictures, two light cannon were placed with sharp spears projecting beyond the shield covering the guns.

Helm and helmet are found in Shakespeare, but without any distinction as we now use the terms: so also casque is found; but the morion and the cabasset, both common to the period, and the bascinet of earlier days still, are never mentioned.

Of the various kinds of swords spoken of by Shakespeare there is only one mention of the two-hander,<sup>1</sup> though in the chorus of Henry V, v, the "whiffler fore the king," refers to a man with such a weapon to clear the way. In 2, Henry IV, ii, iv, Doll Tearsheet calls Pistol a "basket-hilt stale juggler"; this is perhaps an anachronism, as the Schiavona hilt, the forerunner of the basket-hilt, does not appear till much after the date of the play. The back sword, or single-edged sword, was from early days the weapon of the middle and lower classes, and generally used in conjunction with the buckler or small target. Hotspur speaks of Prince Henry as

That same sword-and-buckler Prince of Wales.

Henry IV, i, iii, 230.

The falchion and ranger are not mentioned. The scimitar is spoken of in the Merchant of Venice, ii, i, 24, where it is in the hand of the prince of Morocco, in Troilus and Cressida, and also in Titus Andronicus. It never was an English weapon, and is no doubt the same as the "hoked baslarde" which we are told in Horman's *Vulgaria*, 1519, "is a perelse (perilous) weapon with the Turks."

The curtle-axe which Rosalind was going to wear was of course the cutlass (*coutel hache*) as in Henry V, iv, 2. In Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, iv, ii, 1141, the weapon is called a curt-axe.

The rapier, which was introduced from abroad in Elizabeth's day, is referred to in very many places and

<sup>1</sup> 2, Henry VI, ii, i, 46.

sometimes by itself, sometimes with the dagger or *main gauche*, used for parrying, as the buckler had been, but with the point upward, not downwards as is often seen in modern drawings. The Merry Wives of Windsor, the two parts of Henry IV, Romeo and Juliet, and lastly Hamlet, abound in notices of this weapon. That it was not solely a sticking weapon has been shown by writers such as Hutton, Castle, and others, while the expression "dubbed with unhacked rapier," which occurs in Twelfth Night, shows there was an edge to it. It has been said above that the rapier was introduced into England in Elizabeth's day, but the word occurs in 1547 in the Inventory of Arms, etc., of Henry VIII. The new weapon was not liked in England except by those who used it, and a certain amount of ridicule is thrown on the new vocabulary connected with it, both in Romeo and Juliet and in Hamlet. Falstaff, in the description of his imaginary fight with the men in buckram, used an expressive though uncommon phrase, "I am a rogue if I were not at *half sword* with a dozen of them two hours together."

An interesting passage connected with the sword occurs in Othello, v, ii, 253, where he says,

It is a sword of Spain, the ice-brook's temper.

Now swords are not tempered in cold but rather warm water of varying heat, according to the idea of the swordsmith, and though some writers have gone so far as to identify the river Xalon with this operation, yet if we refer to the earliest edition of the play we find it is "Isebrook's temper." Now in the sixteenth century Innsbruck, whence the best steel was imported into England for armour, etc., up till about 1640, was known to Englishmen as Isebrook. This explains the mixture of Spain and Germany in Othello's remark. The sword was Spanish by origin but with the excellent temper associated with Innsbruck metal.

The swordsmith stamp known in England as the Fox, in Spain as the Perillo or dog, both varieties of the old Passau wolf mark, gives occasion for many *jeux de mots* in plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. We may note Pistol's "Thou diest on point of Fox," and Hamlet's

"Hide Fox and after all" when he sheaths his sword after killing Polonius.

The sword in Shakespeare is in many instances referred to in connection with an oath, or as emphasis. Thus in *Much Ado About Nothing*, IV, I, Benedick says "By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me." In *Winter's Tale*, II, III, Leontes makes Antigonus "swear by this sword thou wilt perform my bidding," and in the next act of the play Cleomenes and Dion are sworn upon "this sword of justice" that they have not broken the seal nor read the secrets of the message from the Delphic oracle. In *Richard II*, I, I, Mowbray swears "by that sword which gently laid my knighthood on my shoulder," that he will answer Bolingbroke in any trial as to his innocence in the matter of the treason alleged against him. In I, *Henry IV*, V, I, Douglas at the battle of Shrewsbury swears by his sword to kill all the wearers of the king's coats. In *Henry V*, II, I, when Bardolph swears he will kill the first who makes a thrust, *i.e.* either Nym or Pistol, the latter says, "Sword is an oath and oaths must have their course." In 2, *Henry IV*, V, III, Salisbury, addressing Richard duke of York, after the battle of St. Albans, says, "Now by my sword well hast thou fought to-day." In *Antony and Cleopatra*, I, III, Antony swears "now by my sword." Shakespeare taking the two arms of the Englishman of his day into classic times makes Cleopatra add "and target." In *Hamlet*, I, V, Marcellus and Horatio are sworn by Hamlet "upon my sword" never to reveal what they have seen of the ghost. Falstaff also swears "by those hilts or I am a villain else."

Of the dagger and the poniard we have plenty of notices, though the skene of Ireland and Scotland are not mentioned. In *Macbeth* of course there are the real daggers that Lady Macbeth demands, and the "dagger of the mind" that her husband sees, which later on his wife refers to as "the air drawn dagger which you said led you to Duncan." In this play we have reference to the dudgeon or boxwood of which the dagger handles or hilts were so often made. In *Twelfth Night*, IV, II, and I, *Henry IV*, II, IV, the theatrical "dagger of lath" is spoken of, and in the latter play "a dagger of lead" also occurs.

To the dagger, used in conjunction with the sword in duels, there are numerous references in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Hamlet*. Of course, the "six French rapiers and poniards" in *Hamlet* refer to the *main gauche* held point upward for parrying.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, v, i, we have another reference to the position of the dagger. When Don Pedro says, "I think he be angry indeed," Claudio replies speaking of Benedick, "If he be, he knows how to turn his girdle," implying that he can bring his dagger round to his hand.

It is difficult to say in what respect the dagger and the poniard differed, and in *Hamlet* in the scene of the proposed fencing match between the prince and Laertes, both words are used with reference to the sword and dagger fight. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice "speaks poniards, and every word stabs," and *Hamlet*, III, ii, says, "I will speak daggers to her but use none."<sup>1</sup> Fighting with sword and dagger is referred to in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, in *Hamlet*, and in *Romeo and Juliet*, also in *Measure for Measure*. As to its place in dress, there is a variety of notices. In *Henry V*, iv, i, Pistol is warned not to wear his dagger in his cap. In *Romeo and Juliet*, v, iii, the custom of wearing the dagger behind and not in front as in earlier times, is illustrated by Capulet's reference to Romeo's dagger with which Juliet has slain herself.

This dagger hath mista'en—for, lo,  
His house is empty on the back of Montague.

*Macbeth's*

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain,

is, of course, familiar to all.

As to wearing the dagger behind the back this may have been the custom in civil life, and certainly in Derricke's *Image of Ireland* (1586) the soldiers also are so shown, but in 1591 Sir John Smith says, "they should wear their daggers, not upon their girdles at their backs, but hanging down upon their right thighs before them after the old English fashion." Certainly Henry VIII

<sup>1</sup> In a similar sense Guiderius in *Cymbeline* iv, ii, says to Cloten: "Thy words, I grant, are bigger: for I wear not a dagger in my mouth."

and others are shown in pictures as wearing the dagger in front, so the other position may have been the foreign custom, but that they were worn on the slant is shown by the expression in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1548) of the ship's yards being "daggerwise," that is, as sailors call it, cock billed. This method of setting the yards used to be general as a sign of mourning.

Harrison, in his description of England, says, "Seldom shall you see any of my countrymen above eighteen or twenty years old to go without a dagger at the least, at his back or by his side."<sup>1</sup>

Thos. Becon, in *The Jewel of Joy*, says of the Englishman, "Their dagger must be Scottish with a Venetian tassell of silk."

Of fire-arms, only the musket, the caliver and the pistol, so far as weapons are concerned, are mentioned in Shakespeare, and the birding-piece only occurs in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the curious habit of discharging them up the chimneys reminds one that the unloading of a charged gun was a troublesome affair.

"The smoky muskets," we find in *All's Well that Ends Well*, III, ii, while in "How now, my eyas-musket?" in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, we see the origin of the name, the endearing term "eyas-musket" referring to the young of a species of sparrow-hawk from which the musket took its name.

Of the caliver we have a distinct appreciation as a lighter gun than the musket, in the fact of its being put into the hand of Wart, one of Sir John Falstaff's very ragged and feeble recruits. In 1, *Henry IV*, IV, ii, Falstaff's remark that some of his men "fear the report of a caliver worse than a struck fowl or a hurt wild duck," suggests the idea that the caliver was used for sport as well as for military purposes. Neither match nor flint as used in connection with fire-arms is met with in any of the plays. As to Pistol, there are many jokes on the name of the impudent bully in the plays in which he

<sup>1</sup> In Cotton's *Scarronides*, 1664, occur the words "with dudgeon dagger at his back." The will of Ralph Campton (Durham), 1594, mentions a punadoe dagger, 12*d.*; the will of John Holcroft,

1559, "one northern dagger with two knives and a bodkyn;" Sir William Booth's will, 1579, "my dropper or hanger;" finally in the will of Richard Rawstone, 1593, we find, "my pocked dagger."

appears, and in *Pericles*, I, i, we have an anachronistic mention of the word.

The dag, tack, and petronel,<sup>1</sup> though all in use in the poet's day, are never referred to.

Of staff weapons Shakespeare alludes to several. In the *Comedy of Errors*, v, i, the Duke calls out "Guard with halberds." In 3, *Henry VI*, IV, iii, the watchmen of the royal tent say, "Unless our halberds did shut up his passage," and in *Richard III*, I, ii, Gloucester threatens the gentlemen attending the funeral of *Henry VI*,

Advance thy halberd higher than my breast,  
Or by St. Paul I'll strike thee to my foot.

The partisan is anachronistically mentioned in *Cymbeline*, and twice it occurs in *Romeo and Juliet* with other weapons, while in *Hamlet*, I, i, the officer Marcellus offers to strike the ghost with this weapon.

The bill, sometimes described as rusty and sometimes as brown, is mentioned in several plays. This weapon—which in peaceable times with its shaft shortened, and so used as a hedge bill—was one of the rallying cries of the English soldiers when "Bows and Bills" alarmed the camp.

The spear and the boar-spear are frequently mentioned, and the only difference between them appears to have been that the boar-spear for the chase had a crossbar just below the head to prevent it entering too far. In the time of *Henry VIII* there were military spears called boar-spears with broad heads and without the crossbar. Many of these are still to be seen in the Tower.

Of the pike we have many notices, but the most interesting is that in *Henry V*, when Pistol asks the king the night before the battle "Art thou officer? or art thou base common and popular?" When Henry replies, "I am a gentleman of a company," Pistol asks, "trail'st thou the puissant pike?" We must remember that in Shakespeare's day the pike was an honourable weapon, and in 1596 Sir William Ward wrote in praise of the pike, and speaks of this weapon as being "put into the hands of the skilful and experienced soldier." He also notes that

<sup>1</sup> The petronel was a weapon in which a stone, either flint or, as in the wheel lock, iron pyrites, was used for discharging the gun instead of a match.

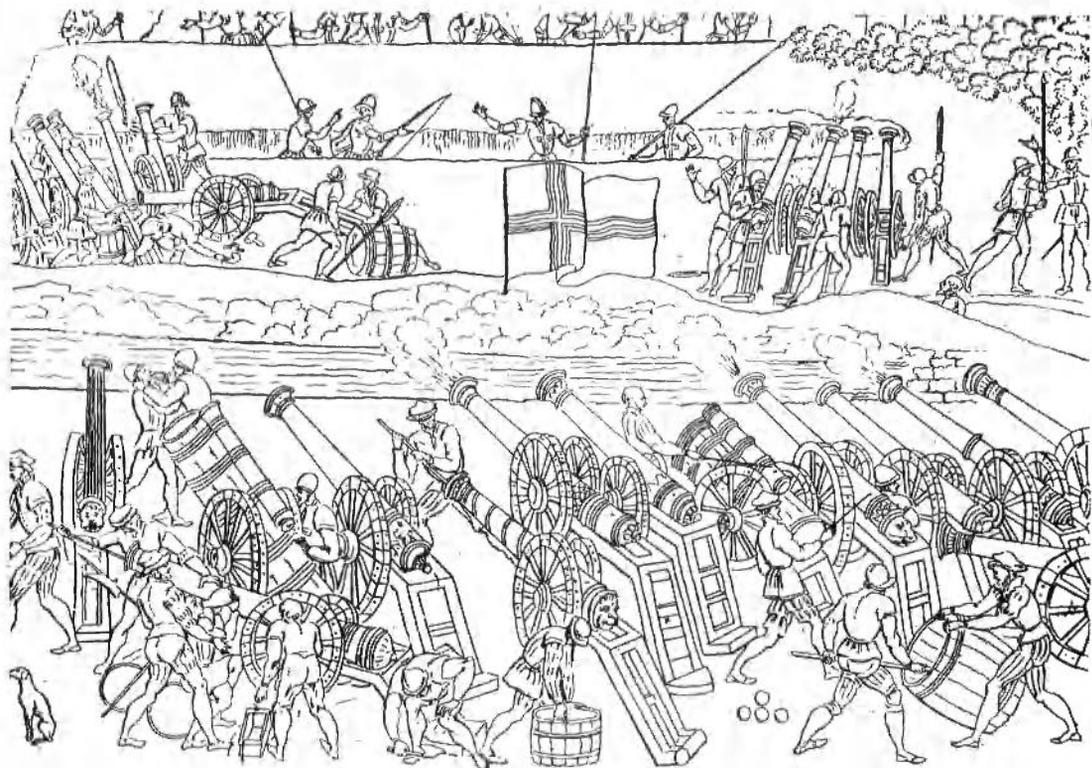
the French did not have any great number of pikemen "not having such personable bodies" as the English. Brantome also speaks of the excellence of the Spanish pikemen, and mentions one who though of great age would never accept a place of command but was nevertheless often consulted on military matters by the Prince of Parma. The pike of Elizabethan days was a weapon some eight to nine feet long with a small head whose length was about five or six inches only. In Lant's drawing of the funeral of Sir Philip Sidney in 1586 we see a pikeman trailing his pike downward in token of mourning. In Derrick's *Image of Ireland*, 1581, the pikes are some twelve feet in length and we know that later on they reached a length of sixteen to eighteen feet.

The lance of course occurs often, and in *King Lear*, iv, vi, the "strong lance of justice" is mentioned. Only in *Winter's Tale* and in *Othello* does the poet speak of the sword of justice.

Artillery is introduced largely, and regardless of date, into the plays, as in *Winter's Tale*, *King John*, *Hamlet*, etc. The basilisk, a gun throwing a shot of about 48 lbs., is often referred to metaphorically, but only in 1, *Henry IV*, ii, iii, and *Henry V*, v, ii, as a real piece of ordnance.

The cannon with a bore of eight inches and throwing 63 lbs. of iron is generally mentioned as a generic term, but in 1, *Henry IV*, ii, iii, though anachronistically introduced, it may by its association with basilisks and culverins refer to the large piece of Shakespeare's day. The culverin only occurs in that passage, and is, of course, one of those names derived from *couleuvre*, a snake or adder.

Another such word is the sling. In *Henry V*, iv, vii, Shakespeare refers to the Assyrian sling, but in *Hamlet* it may be that "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" refer to cannon rather than to the sling as we know the word now. It must be remembered that in the sixteenth century amongst the many kinds of cannon were slings, three-quarter slings, half-slings, and quarter-slings; the first throwing balls of two-and-a-half lbs. These cannon took their names from their German prototypes the *Schlange*, a word meaning snake or serpent. The sling as a weapon, of course, became popular



WOODEN CANNON IN THE BATTERIES BEFORE BOULOGNE. FROM AN ENGRAVING  
OF A DESTROYED PICTURE IN COWRAY HOUSE.

in the wars of the Fronde in France, but that struggle did not begin until some thirty years after Shakespeare's day.

The mace in Henry V, IV, i, is associated with the sword and crown imperial and other external signs of majesty, and is of course not the weapon as mentioned in the Comedy of Errors, IV, iii. The battle-axe is only mentioned in Titus Andronicus, III, i, and the poll-axe in Love's Labour Lost, v, ii.

In Henry IV, II, iv, a weapon is mentioned of which it is difficult to ascertain the nature. Falstaff speaking of Glendower says that he "swore the devil his true liegeman upon the cross of a *Welsh hook*." This sounds like a Jedburgh or Lochaber axe, a weapon having at the back of the axe hand a hook, variously supposed to be for pulling a horseman off his horse or for cutting the reins, when the inside of the hook is sharp like a knife. There was a great variety of weapons of this nature, and wild people like the Scotch and the Welsh no doubt had many peculiar weapons.