

From Combat to Commemoration
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Laughing at War Wounds in Shakespeare's Day and Our Own

This paper sits at the often-uncomfortable intersection of comedy and combat wounds, reading the 2018 appearance of Dan Crenshaw, a wounded American veteran turned conservative Congressman, on the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* alongside a number of early modern English plays. Bridging continents and centuries, wars and genres, these performances all share a sincere investment in a semiotics of combat wounds, and examining them together helps reveal how the social meaning of wartime injury is both constructed and contested. Comedy, with its long-standing affinity for subversion, for speaking truth to power, offers an avenue of inquiry into two very different periods of war.

Irreverent, occasionally even tasteless, humor at the expense of the wounded veteran's body is an inherently political act, and Crenshaw pairs his effort to wrest control of the narrative around his own body with a specific set of political outcomes. Not content to shield himself from some crass late-night humor, the Congressman uses the moment to demand continued public support for America's decades-long wars. The pivot from policing the boundaries of acceptable humor to promoting a political cause turns on Crenshaw's wounds. Injured in public service, he seems to say, the veteran's wounds should have an outsized public voice. But the returned soldier alone cannot construct social meaning. To the public, the wounds might signal something about the bearer's (un)fitness for civil office, as in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, or they could be pressed into criminal service, as Ancient Pistol plans for his wartime disciplinary injuries. Alongside SNL's contemporary comedic conflagration with Crenshaw, I examine a number of early modern English plays—Shakespeare's *1 Henry IV* (1597), *Henry V* (1599), and *Coriolanus* (1609); Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599); the anonymous *A Larum for London* (1599); and John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *Little French Lawyer* (1619).

Short bio:

Nick Utzig is a PhD candidate in English at Harvard University, where he specializes in early modern drama and militarism. Before coming to Harvard, Nick served as a helicopter pilot in the US Army, including tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, experiences that have shaped his study of war and literature. His dissertation examines the figure of the returned soldier in early modern English drama—a project not so much focused on stage combat as stage *homecoming*—and more generally, he's interested in literary engagements with war and its lingering aftereffects. In his spare moments he researches the fascinating stage career of Maurice Evans, one of midcentury Broadway's leading Shakespearean performers. His work has appeared in the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* and *The Year's Work in Medievalism*, and he occasionally reviews military-themed books for the *LA Review of Books*.