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BOOK REVIEW

Women in Wartime: Theatrical Representations in the Long Eighteenth Century

By Paula R. Backscheider. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022; pp. xv + 438, 12 illustrations. \$102 hardcover; \$37 paper; \$37 e-book.

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Recent US Army recruitment advertisements feature young adults asking their mothers, “What do you think?” about their desire to enlist. These mothers display trepidation and anxiety as they envision the life ahead, but ultimately signal acceptance or consideration. In *Women in Wartime: Theatrical Representations in the Long Eighteenth Century*, Paula R. Backscheider offers an expansive prehistory of this familiar gendered and generational patriotism. Positioning the eighteenth century as a crucial moment for the militarization of British society, and the theatre as a place to reflect and shape responses to these cultural changes, Backscheider offers two important interventions. For military historians, she emphasizes the centrality of military life to women of all classes. For theatre historians, she shows how thoroughly entwined the theatre was with experiences of and public debates about military service, war, recruiting, the empire, and veterans’ affairs. As she puts it, “Great Britain needed new models of gendered patriotism, and the theatre supplied them” (254).

Backscheider’s argument unfurls from 1677 to the Napoleonic Wars, tracing the stage representation of “ordinary” wartime women (mothers, sweethearts, camp followers, sex workers, and so forth). In Chapter 1, Backscheider illustrates conceptions and performances of wartime womanhood using characters from Restoration tragedies written as the country entered a century of near-constant warfare. Although royal and aristocratic, these characters support a growing public sense of theatre’s ability to reflect and shape attitudes to contemporary issues.

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate a consistent strength of the study: attention to often-overlooked incidents and lower-class characters who layered a thread of topical realism into conventional comedic plots during the later Stuart era. Breeches roles, for example, enabled women to take on and model ideal British martial masculinity as well as to curb its excesses and battle tyrannical behavior within military hierarchies. Over the next hundred years, theatrical representation of this more critical kind fell away, focusing instead on instilling faith in the nobility of military professions and those within them. As what Backscheider calls the “Marlborough era” (9) continued, plays’ settings and representations of women expanded together to

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include camps and ports, and the women found there. Here, Backscheider argues theatre shows us what is difficult to see elsewhere: the prevalence of women in wartime settings, and their integral necessity to camp infrastructure. The plays also highlight the theatre as an important place where cultural changes and challenges were examined. For example, in Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* he uses the breeches role of Silvia to interrogate patriotic masculinity, highlight the problematics of recruiting, and "draw out the similarities between seduction/rape and recruiting/deployment" (123). These plays combine "strange . . . statements of high-minded patriotism and ugly, graphic dramatizations of the realities of war" (103).

Chapters 4 and 5 look at nonmainpiece works, bringing these occasional, spectacle- and music-laden events to the fore and emphasizing their importance as a form of news. Spanning the middle decades of the century, they emphasize the "development of major dramatic and propagandistic adaptations and innovations" (152). Kitty Clive and Peg Woffington propagated two models of patriotic femininity: Clive the beautiful woman who encourages and is the reward of distinguished duty (The "Recruiter"); Woffington the woman in breeches prepared to take up arms and fight if men are unwilling (The "Volunteer"). Alongside their oft-repeated patriotic epilogues, theatre generated and used songs such as "Rule, Britannia!" and "God Save the King" to rouse patriotic zeal. Chapter 5 looks at the American Revolutionary War's impacts, which are multiple. Women characters, for example, continue to evolve toward Clive's pattern of encouraging rather than modeling correct masculine behavior, a change Backscheider suggests was also spurred by the evolving "two-body" understanding of sex, which positioned women as entirely other (rather than simply the inverse) of men (201). Additionally, the navy's increasing importance to Britain resulted in a magnified, positive stage representation of naval characters in both revised plays and new ones. Still, plays and playwrights continued to be close to the lived experiences of military life, and even as the theatre helped revise attitudes toward recruitment, impressment, and deployment, the hardships of wartime men and women never entirely left the stage.

Chapter 6 returns to full-length comedy and higher-class women characters in the final decades of the century. Here, familiar romantic structures specifically address the challenges of married military life (including separation, deprivation, and disability) at all class levels, while courtship plots emphasize the steadfast woman who chooses a military man over other suitors embodying a host of undesirable traits. This chapter also discusses theatrical representations of women of color, accurately implicating the theatre in harmful racial discourse that "strengthened the growing assignment of race by skin color and created and established stereotypes" (298). Backscheider concludes this final chapter by emphasizing how the theatrical form—especially comedy—provided reassurance and reconciliation as the conclusion to even the starkest depictions of wartime realities, turning patriotism into "a real category of behavior" (314).

Spanning six hefty chapters, plus an introduction, a coda, and two substantive appendices, the sheer scale of the endeavor is impressive. Military context is helpfully provided in Appendix A, but readers are sometimes left with an imperfect understanding of the plays under discussion. Although it is reasonable to assume some plots will be familiar to readers, there are pieces that would be aided by

greater explication. Similarly, the aim of reading across character types in different plays in Chapters 2 and 3 is useful but not always clearly signposted, and a fuller examination of what Bakscheider terms “nonbinary” performance (123) regarding cross-dressing roles is warranted.

There is much to appreciate in this study: Bakscheider attends to revisions of plays over time that helped them meet the nation’s evolving needs; she brings into focus underinvestigated women characters, as well as the importance of performers like Margaret Martyr, Margaret Farrell Kennedy, and Charlotte Goodall, to the cultural and patriotic work of the theatre. The assertion of the undeniable importance of war and military life to all aspects of the century’s theatre, and the connections among war, patriotism, and representations of race and gender are valuable and welcome. Bakscheider has convincingly uncovered and cataloged a history of gendered patriotism we can still see and recognize today.