

BOOK REVIEW

Women in Wartime: Theatrical Representations in the Long Eighteenth Century

By Paula R. Backscheider, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022, pp. 456 ISBN-10 1421441675.

Meghan Kobza 

School of History, Classics, and Archaeology, University of Newcastle, Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom

The roles of wartime women have pervaded popular culture for centuries; the brave woman dressing as a man to join the army, the hardworking military nurse saving a wounded soldier, the patient navy wife waiting for her husband's return. Paula Backscheider brings these women to the fore, examining how the creation and evolution of wartime women's roles reflected and impacted the nation and those within it. She meticulously traces shifts in plot, character and popular reception across significant wartime periods. This approach highlights the importance of applying a methodology based in 'intertheatricality' (pp. 2–3). The depth of evidence in *Women in Wartime* is staggering; Backscheider draws upon over fifty plays and a wide range of performances including prologues, interludes, epilogues, masques, after pieces and main pieces. Her multidisciplinary approach skilfully interweaves theatrical plot, character analysis, actor and playwright biography, visual culture and historical context to provide a nuanced examination of women's wartime roles and ultimately proves they were crucial contributors to the wartime effort and eighteenth-century conceptions of patriotism.

This original and innovative study adds to existing conversations on theatre, gender and performance, building on the arguments of Felicity Nussbaum, Gillian Russell and Lisa A. Freeman, while simultaneously opening new avenues of exploration. It likewise fills a noticeable gap within the existing literature and presents new perspectives on how specific wartime women's roles were formative in shaping contemporary perceptions of war, masculinity, gender and class.

The great strength of this work is its constant awareness of intertheatricality. Throughout the study, Backscheider narrates the historical landscape, providing important and specific context for the connections between the female characters themselves as well as between the characters and the actors, wars and audience. This begins in Chapter 1, which introduces the roots of wartime women's roles in Restoration theatre and examines how these roles begin to operate as symbols of contemporary figures and sensual, sexed figures on stage.

This increasing use of sexuality and awareness of bodies carries into Chapter 2, looking at women who illustrate varying motivations for and physical components of performing breeches roles. Additionally, this chapter uses Susanna Centlivre's work to establish several main themes that carry throughout the century and *Women in Wartime*, mainly: (1) the father's objection to a daughter marrying military, (2) an increasing ability of women to choose their spouses, (3) an emphasis on women as judges of the appropriateness of displays of 'courageous' violence and (4) women being written and viewed as rewards for martial bravery and action. These central themes are further explored in Chapter 3, which supplies a close analysis of the intricate relationship between playwright, script and

character and how this impacted depictions of recruitment throughout mid-eighteenth-century theatre. Backscheider draws connections across various representations of recruiting, identifying it as a multifaceted and fluctuating practice that operated as a spectacle and performance as well as a disruption to towns, relationships and traditional martial practices. Equally as important, she explains how these plays presented women in new roles and spaces – as active agents of recruitment and in camp settings and urban spaces, each of which exhibits the importance of women within the infrastructure of the military.

Chapters 4 and 6 build upon the idea of a patriotic woman using the examples of popular actresses and the fluctuating gender roles they played on stage. Backscheider credits Kitty Clive as creating and performing the first ‘gendered, patriot “woman”’; a woman who can balance of patriotism and love (p. 166). She explains that this tension underpinned later depictions of wartime wives, including those from the middling and upper ranks of society and Black and Indigenous women of the empire. Her analysis highlights that wartime women on stage contributed to the cultural belief that polite, patriotic, virtuous women would recognise and reward the returned soldier with love and marriage.

Drawing attention to the importance of intertheatricality, Chapter 5 traces the ways that plays and their wartime women were revised to accommodate cultural shifts related to the American War for Independence. The chapter uses a range of theatrical styles to expand on the recurring themes of recruiting, women’s relationships to military men and participation in the army, while also drawing on visual culture to examine how breeches roles and costume evolved in written and physical form. This is one of many examples of Backscheider’s awareness of how gender representation circulated beyond the stage and is a particular strength of her work.

Women in Wartime is masterfully written tying together theory, historical context and a vast body of evidence. It provides a new and nuanced study of how theatre and wartime women’s roles impacted and reflected women’s relationships with and involvement in the military throughout the long eighteenth century. Backscheider’s work is relevant far beyond the eighteenth century; she identifies quintessential themes that continue to shape perceptions of gender in theatre and literature today, and perhaps most importantly, shows how intertheatricality can impact studies of theatre, gender, representation and reception.

ORCID

Meghan Kobza  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6308-7754>