

Introductory Comment

ROBERT A. SCHNEIDER

I should begin by noting that, while I once worked on the eighteenth century, I am now, and have been for longer than I care to admit, stuck in the early seventeenth. So I have been out of the loop about many of the new developments in eighteenth-century studies. And these papers by Ellen Ledoux and Christy Pichichero remind me what I've been missing. Indeed, as both a rather naïve reader and as a historian—or do I repeat myself?—one of the pleasures in reading them is simply learning things about which I had absolutely no idea. There were, as Ellen tells us, “hundreds” of figures of woman warriors “in popular ballads of the eighteenth and nineteenth century;” and, remarkably, according to a contemporary memoir, “many crossed-dressed women were found among the slain on in the field of Waterloo.” Who knew? I certainly didn't. Christy's revelations are perhaps less dramatic, but no less interesting. Who would have guessed that such exquisite solicitude for the well-being of soldiers, such authentic manifestations of sensibility, such well-tuned humanitarian sentiments were evident, not only in the pampered salons, but in the barracks of the eighteenth-century behemoth, the fiscal military state? (I almost expected Christy to tell us that—like my daughters in their grade school and soccer games in the era of “every child is excellent, every child wins”—every soldier got a gold star or a medal just for managing to show up for battle.)

But beyond these revelations, these papers have, of course arguments. Ellen's presents us with two figures, Hannah Snell and Mary Anne Talbot, both women who, dressed and largely passing as men, served in the British army and navy in the second half of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth. And she uses their life stories to ask how it is that marginalized figures such as they—victimized and harried in their own contexts—could willingly participate in imperial military enterprises that victimized others? As a foil for her account, she begins the paper with the well-known example of the anti-slavery medallion with the inscription, “Am I not a Woman and a Sister?”—which in Ellen's words, “drew on universal consanguinity to demand that one group of women care about the rights of another.” Why, her paper asks, in revealing and fascinating episodes from Snell and Talbot's stories, both in combat and in their post-bellum lives, did these two women fail to care—and even worse, participated in and condoned acts of cruelty toward others—when other people, who certainly had less psychological motivation and narrower grounds for humanitarian empathy, manifestly did care.

At the end of the paper, she concedes that she might be charged with “reading without sensitivity to historical context,” of assessing Snell and Talbot not “in relation to their own moment,” but rather in light “of contemporary feminist principles....” To answer this charge, which (to her credit) she herself raises, she evokes examples of contemporaries deploying similar ethical values as we might, judging harshly women who embraced violence. She thus concludes that “feminist and queer scholarship has a responsibility to not only celebrate these women for their physical bravery, but also to hold them accountable for their political compromises.”

I will return in a moment to this assertion of holding historical figures “accountable,” for it strikes me as an imperative that informs the whole paper. But first there is a question relating to background information, which I would like to put to Ellen—a rather

basic one. These “many” cross-dressed women on the Waterloo battlefield: what were they doing there? Let me be more precise. The examples of Snell and Talbot are unusual, even eccentric, especially in terms of their self-presentation and self-fashioning that marked their life stories. But as women disguised as men on the battlefield, they clearly weren’t unique. And yet Ellen’s account highlights the eccentricity of their adventures and travails—especially with regards to Talbot’s apparent queerness—in a way that seems to forestall a meaningful connection between their cases and the wider phenomenon of women disguised as men in battle. I suppose it’s the historian in me that wants to know more about the wider distribution of a phenomenon before I am prepared to assess a particular instantiation of it as endowed with meaningfully unique characteristics. And yet Ellen’s presentation is informed throughout by notions of queerness that work to convince us—in the case of Talbot, clearly justifiably—that sexual marginality was a distinguishing feature of these women’s identity. If it wasn’t for all of them—and I’m referring to all those women at Waterloo—what was? It seems to me that an examination of the more mundane aspects of this still extraordinary phenomenon might tell us a lot, perhaps not so much about the ethical conundrum Ellen evokes, but rather about its meaning for the women themselves and those who regarded them.

Now to the question of holding these women “accountable.” It seems to me that this might help us in our general discussion here. What are our expectations for how and to what extent people “cared” in the past, in this case the eighteenth century? Let me put it this way. I expect certain things from my family, from my students, from my fellow citizens, and vice versa. Expectations are tied up with at least the potential of reciprocity and relatedness. I can expect something—respect from daughters, good work from my students, abiding by democratic principles from my fellow citizens—because I am, in some way, involved with them; I have claims on them; they have claims on me. Do we have the same relationship with people in the past? We have, I believe, a responsibility to them—to strive to represent them fairly, remaining open to as much information about them as can be garnered, but also to approach them with some humility about the limits of our own historical understanding. Do we have a responsibility to judge them—or as in Ellen’s paper to find Snell and Talbot lacking in the care for the marginal and victimized that one might legitimately expect from two marginal and victimized women? Is it fair to impose ethical expectations on people who have no claim on us? (And while my tone and phrasing here might suggest that I’m really sure about how I answer this question—I truly pose it as a question for myself as well as for others.)

Christy’s paper offers a rather different view of eighteenth-century military culture, or at least looks at it from a somewhat different angle. She establishes, in short, that the military sphere participated actively in the development of an Enlightenment culture ultimately of human rights. Contesting Foucault’s assertion that the eighteenth century witnessed the development of a disciplinary regime of coercing and controlling bodies—the military dream of society based upon automatic docility—she convincingly establishes that consent not coercion informed the emerging military ethos. Her main source in this paper is a text by a general in service to France, Maurice, Count of Saxony, *Mes Réveries*, published posthumously in 1757. Here is combined a humanitarian solicitude for the well-being of the common soldier with a pragmatic appreciation that a fit, well-rested, mentally alert man makes a better soldier. As well, Saxe advocated an empirical approach

to soldiering and warfare, sounding at times like Tolstoy or John Keegan in his dismissal of military strategists' presumption to plan, calculate, predict, or otherwise control the nature of battle. Rather, he appreciates the capriciousness and indeterminacy of battle-field behavior. Understanding it, he writes, lies "in the human heart and we must search for it there."

My reading of Christy's informative paper suggests several questions and comments. First, I would point out that to see the military as a venue for the adoption of enlightenment principles should not really surprise us. After all, if any sphere of activity was subject to the ethos of professionalism in the eighteenth century, it was the military. Moreover, reform and critique—so central to the Enlightenment project—was the order of the day for military leaders, especially in light of France's poor performance on the battle-field against the Austrians and British. As my teacher David Bien argued many years ago, even such seemingly reactionary measures like the Ségur law of 1781, which stipulated four quarters of nobility for entry into the royal military school, was understood as enacting Lockean principles of sensationalism insofar as it was assumed that the best (that is, noble) families would create the best environment to breed the best candidates for a military elite.

Second: I wonder if a source for the concern for the well-being of soldiers might be found in the public's increasing exposure to military men in the eighteenth century as compared to earlier times. For in my own study of an early modern city across more than three centuries, I was struck by how eighteenth-century public life was increasingly marked by the presence of regiments—in barracks in or near the city, in public processions and ceremonies, on guard during public executions and, as cadres of officers and regular soldiers alike, as faithful and numerous theater-goers. And it was a presence that was not evident in previous times. Could the eighteenth-century public's exposure to the military now have fostered a new sense of caring for these men in their midst?

Finally, returning to the main question here: I do think there is still something counter-intuitive about an Enlightened military, despite the massive evidence that it is, in fact, once we think about it, quite reasonable. If this is so, why is it so? I think there are several reasons. First is simply the assumption that the military and warfare are essentially about power, force, killing, and aggression; command, obedience, discipline, and routine; and everything else that strikes us as antithetical to the individuality and reasoning self that we associate with the Enlightenment. Evidence such as that which Christy presents demonstrates how wrong this is, and how capacious and elastic Enlightenment culture really was.

But second, I think too that what disturbs us is that here we have a solicitude for the mental health and well-being of one's own soldiers all in the service of slaughtering as effectively and completely as possible legions of other soldiers. So that caring in this context can be channeled, directed and limited, turned on and then just as quickly—and necessarily—turned off. We like to think that humanitarian sentiments are not simply techniques; that they stem from well-springs of beliefs and feelings that flow freely and in all directions, without discriminating between deserving objects of our solicitude and care. Clearly this is not the case. And perhaps this is where Christy's paper joins up with Ellen's, both demonstrating the cultivation of care, the expectation of care, but also its limits, indeed its negation in the same culture and even in the same people.