

Play in War, War in Play

HALL BJØRNSTAD

In her opening remarks two days ago, Rebecca stressed the paradox of having a *workshop* about *play*, suggesting that the topic might in fact turn us into an “eighteenth-century *playgroup*.” My feeling is that we have now been working and playing long enough for our group to have turned into what Huizinga calls a “play-community.” This is from page 49 in the reader: we are sitting here “quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life,” pursuing an activity which is not fully serious and yet that absorbs us “intensely and utterly.” And then again: “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms [— this feeling of being ‘apart together’] retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”

And yet, despite this enduring magic, our playing will of course not continue beyond the individual two-day game which is now approaching its end. It remains to be seen what the imminent end will do to our discussion: whether it will add a certain solemnity or seriousness, or maybe even melancholy, inside the game. Or, instead, bring out the triflers among us.

In any case, the end is near, this will inevitably make us play differently—and that is why I think Cornelis and Jonathan’s papers belong here, in the final panel. These two papers are both very strong, very important, very ambitious. They are fascinating explorations of particulars (concrete objects or phenomena), but at the same time they raise important questions about our general topic, putting “the Eighteenth Century in Play” by addressing “Play in the Eighteenth Century” through the notion of war. In doing so, they bring together many of the issues we have already been playing around with, opening in some ways our final discussion right away. In what follows, I will focus on these elements in the two papers.

But first of all, a few quick words about the two panelists, in order to situate the papers you have read, inside their wider scholarly agenda.

Cornelis van der Haven has his PhD from Utrecht University, more precisely—and I like the coincidence here—from the Huizinga Graduate School for Cultural History. After defending his thesis in 2008, he was a research fellow at the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation and the Freie Universität in Berlin, before starting as an assistant professor of early modern Dutch literature at Ghent University in September last year. His research has focused on the intersection of political, religious, and economic thinking in relation to the production of early modern theatre texts; and the expression of patriotic feelings, both in cultural and political terms, in Dutch and German eighteenth-century literature. The paper we have read is part of a wider project, as suggested by the provisional title of the monograph he is working on: *Enlightenment at War: Epic Poetry, the Citizen and Discursive Bridges to the Military (1740-1800)*.

Jonathan Elmer is Professor and Chair at the Department of English here in Bloomington. His PhD is from UC Berkeley, where he trained as an antebellum Americanist, leading him to a first book on Edgar Allan Poe and mass culture in America (Stanford 1995).

Since then his research and teaching has increasingly considered colonial and early national eras, and writers of the anglophone Atlantic world from Aphra Behn to Thomas Jefferson to Herman Melville. Some of this research was central in his second book, *On Lingering and Being Last: Fictions of Race and Sovereignty in the New World* (Fordham 2008). He has also published essays on trauma theory, systems theory, contemporary film, race, and the concept of the archive. As Jonathan made clear already in his self-presentation when we started our discussion nearly two days ago, he would be first in line if one were to look for the person responsible for having proposed *play* as the topic for this year's workshop. No surprise, then, that his workshop paper is part of a wider project. In one phrase: "this wider project is exploring the nature of play as a social, aesthetic, and interpretive phenomenon."

So already here there is an interesting symmetry between the two papers in this panel: they are both on play and war but one is part of a wider project on war, whereas the other is part of a project on play. In fact, when talking to Cornelis and Jonathan, they are both a little uncertain where their workshop paper fits in their own wider project: Cornelis is not sure how to integrate the play element, Jonathan has similar questions about war.

That said, I should stress that this panel is of course not the beginning of our discussion of play and war. Already the first panel with Kathryn and Danny's papers on Wednesday was in important ways about play and war, and war continued to emerge in our discussion yesterday, above all related to Anne's paper, but also in some of the others. My first question to the panelists, and to all of you, is then: Why this strong link between play and war? Is it universal? Does war allow us to speak more forcefully about play in general, or does it tell us something about play specific to the eighteenth century?

From the perspective of war, the eighteenth century is of course decisive. As Jonathan points out in his introduction (p. 206 of the reader): "There is a prevailing view that something profound happened to warfare in the late eighteenth century, something that had everything to do with the collapse of aristocratic society, and with the collapse of any kind of 'cultural function' to warfare, and a kind of 'play-element' in it." I think this statement can be a good starting point for approaching Cornelis' paper, and most of all, I would like to invite you to situate your paper in relation to what you call the "military Enlightenment." You trace an eighteenth-century "ambition to understand the role of the single participants [of war] and their experiences while acting on the battle field" and you do so through what you call "three different modes of identification": the military re-enactment on stage; the maneuvers in the field as public military spectacle, and finally the "transformation of the epic military hero into a man of feelings" in Lessing's *Philotas*. The paper does of course end with the same observation as the one I just quoted from Jonathan's paper. With Lessing (and now I quote from the very last phrase of the paper), with Lessing "the detached 'theatrical' vision of war as a game is transformed ... into an experience of horror, pain and pity."

My question is whether the three "modes of identification" that you describe can be seen as three stages in a development towards this endpoint, in the unfolding of a "military Enlightenment"? The reason I ask is of course the gulf separating the last one (Lessing's *Philotas*) from the two others. As you show, the re-enactment and the public maneuver certainly stage war in new ways, but at the same time they very much remain within a framework of glorification and fascination (although more participatory, from a

civic point of view, where patriotism takes on a new role). It is a very long way from there to the undoing of the glorious spectacle of war in the person of Philotas. (On the one hand, a reshaping and redefinition of the glorious spectacle of war; on the other, its undoing).

Another version of my question would therefore be the following: does the “military Enlightenment” consist in shedding light on war by the theatrical strategies portrayed in the first two “modes of identification” or rather—or even, *only*—in the staging of the “experience of horror, pain and pity” which has always been at the heart of war? (the darkness of war, if you will) – Do the two first “modes of identification” already point to the last? Are they somehow preparing the ground, maybe even necessary to enable *Philotas*? What is the link between theater and “military Enlightenment” in general? What does it mean to *stage* the end of war as play? Maybe all I have said can be boiled down to this: What do you mean by military Enlightenment?

Turning now to Jonathan’s paper, we meet another fascinating test case for our understanding of the link between play and war (and the development of this link) in the eighteenth century, in the “Mischianza.” I love the assertiveness of the phrase you quote from Linda Colley: “In May 1778 a medieval tournament took place on the banks of the Delaware river.” Being myself a scholar of seventeenth-century France, I would have added a layer: “what took place could be seen as a re-enactment of early modern European court societies’ *representation* of medieval tournaments.” But that would of course still be an escapist fantasy, indexing, as you say in your introduction, “the passing of an era”, “the last gasp of aristocratic warrior culture.” Could we instead of “nostalgia and naïveté” perceive in the “Mischianza” the thematizing of a “dynamic of present and past”? A dynamic linked to an epistemological uncertainty, an historical ambiguity inscribed in the play-element of war itself? This seems to be the question driving the exploration in the paper, conducted at a crucial moment in close dialogue with Danny O’Quinn’s recent work on the “Mischianza.”

For if we look more closely, the significance of the “Mischianza” does not reside in nostalgia, in accentuation of rupture, discontinuity or loss, but rather in its inconsequence. “Ultimately (and here I am quoting Jonathan, quoting Danny—ultimately), the ‘Mischianza’, and the tournament at its heart, are exercises in ‘attenuation, rather than closure’”. It is an event that is lingering on the threshold, an “argument for moderation, for delay, for keeping doors open,” a “posture that tries to keep always in view an outside of the conflict.” In this way, the “Mischianza” can be interpreted as a “turn away from the history of the historical drama.” Here is the phrase I interpret as your conclusion, although it comes four pages before the end (p. 220): “Performances like the Mischianza exist in some fundamental way to negotiate and enact a ratio between stasis and rupture, between synchrony and diachrony: they are expressions of human historical time, of historicity.” Is that your conclusion?