

“I am not a Woman and a Sister”: Female Soldiers in the Eighteenth-Century Imperial Contact Zone

ELLEN MALENAS LEDOUX

Beginning in 1787, Josiah Wedgwood created several iterations of a famous abolitionist symbol: the Jasper Medallion. The “female” version, which appeared in the 1830s, depicts a genuflecting slave with an inscription demanding, “AM I NOT A WOMAN AND A SISTER?” (emphasis original). The medallion became a fashionable adornment within popular culture—analogue to contemporary, pink, breast-cancer-research ribbon—and therefore lost some of its political gravity. However, the rhetorical premise behind the medallion’s creation remained very powerful. By drawing on a common gendered status (“woman”) and a sex-specific familial tie (“sister”) the inscription hoped to galvanize white women’s sympathetic identification with the plight of enslaved black women. Making immediate to the British public the oppression of a rarely witnessed and therefore somewhat abstract constituency, the medallion drew on universal consanguinity to demand that one group of women care about the rights of another. Those that wore the medallion demonstrated that they did care in levels that varied from the symbolic to the truly activist. Indeed as Jean Fagan Yellin, Clare Midgley, Stacey Robertson and others have demonstrated, the abolitionist movement forms a bright spot in feminist history, insofar as middle-class white women were instrumental in advancing the cause of universal human rights.¹

My paper, however, addresses a less-discussed valence of women’s transatlantic racial and gendered history: British women who could not or would not respond to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth call for female solidarity—namely, working-class women serving in the military.² Although a relatively small percentage of the female population, the cross-dressed female soldier or “woman warrior” played an important symbolic role within Anglophone popular culture from the time of the American Revolution through the Napoleonic Wars, and appeared frequently in ballads, comic operas, plays, and life writing. Diane Dugaw has documented hundreds of these figures in popular ballads of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and they also appear frequently in comic operas, plays, and various types of life writing—the genres examined below. Previous scholarship recognizes that the popularity of these figures throughout the Revolutionary era has important political implications. Scarlet Bowen demonstrates how the memoirs of Christian Davies and Hannah Snell worked to shame men into masculine aggression and to bolster nationalism during the Anglo-Spanish War (1739-45) and the concurrent War of the Austrian

¹ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women & Sisters : The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Claire Midgeley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992); and Stacey Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

² I am indebted to participants in the “Decolonizing Gender/Gendering Decolonization” seminar at the Institute for Research on Women (Rutgers University 2013-2014) for their vibrant critique of this work. Special thanks are due to my respondent, Ronald Cummings, for his many thoughtful suggestions.

Succession (1740-48).³ Julie Wheelwright traces how these narratives become softened and feminized as they get redacted and reprinted in the Victorian period.⁴ Critics such as Diane Dugaw and Daniel Cohen frame female militants as working-class heroines or important examples of an emerging model of female masculinity, and by extension, suggest that these figures serve a progressive, even feminist, purpose by highlighting gender performativity and de-stabilizing heteronormativity.⁵ In the early American context, Cohen argues popular pamphlets on female soldiers “constructed a vision of female autonomy and self-assertion far more radical than the images of a Republican Wife, Republican Mother, and True Woman” that were widely circulated in the Revolutionary period.⁶ In the British context, Dugaw argues that these plucky heroines demonstrate “both sides of the traditionally bifurcated ideal of western heroism: female Love and male Glory”⁷ as they escape dysfunctional domesticity and appropriate male military guise to pursue lovers across the seas or to fight patriotically for king, country, and prize money.

My intervention is also concerned with the political impact of female combatants, but it focuses specifically on how these transgressive figures’ claims to subjectivity as representatives of the British military depended upon active participation in the imperial project. I focus on two veterans of foreign wars, Hannah Snell and Mary Anne Talbot, who served in the British army and navy between 1745 and 1810 and later capitalized on their experiences by publishing biographies, selling their portraits, and—in Snell’s case—performing on stage. Snell’s and Talbot’s various self-representations demonstrate that their ability to perform masculinity, and indeed their very survival, hinged on a narrative and discursive investment in colonialism, violence, and racial hegemony. Snell and Talbot marketed their own exceptional bodies to a London audience and laid claim to the Enlightenment ideals of both personal and political “liberty” through eliding the unexceptional, routine violence perpetrated on the colonial, foreign, and female bodies they encountered in both formal and informal scenes of military life.

In formal battle scenes, both Snell and Talbot displayed a cartoonish, jingoistic version of British military masculinity that continually elided violence or glorified its aims. This elision is particularly important because Snell’s and Talbot’s literary and dramatic representations addressed a geographically isolated London audience. As David Cannadine and Laura Chrisman have recently suggested, there was a complex, reciprocal interplay between popular images and

³ Scarlet Bowen, “‘The Real Soul of a Man in her Breast’: Popular Opposition and British Nationalism in Memoirs of Female Soldiers, 1740-1750.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28:3 (2004): 20-45.

⁴ Julie Wheelwright, “‘Amazons and Military Maids’: An Examination of Female Military Heroines in British Literature and the Changing Construction of Gender,” *Women’s Studies* 10:5 (1987): 489-502.

⁵ See Diane Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Daniel Cohen, *The Female Marine: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America’s Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1998).

⁶ Daniel Cohen, “‘The Female Marine’ in an Era of Good Feelings: Cross Dressing and the ‘Genius’ of Nathaniel Coverly, Jr.” *The Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103:2 (1994): 360.

⁷ Dugaw, *Warrior Women*, 2.

narratives from overseas and the administrative center of the British Empire.⁸ Both Snell and Talbot recounted naval and ground battles that shored up British imperial dominance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Snell told of her stalwart performance at Pondicherry—a siege integral to establishing British colonial control over Madras. Wounded, she was alleged to have removed the shell herself to avoid the detection of her sex and expulsion from the marines. Thus, she was already a bit of a “folk hero” even before her stage show and memoir appeared in summer 1750. Talbot showcased her service and wounding on the Glorious First of June—a naval battle that inaugurated a new round of Franco-Anglo global maritime hostility after the French Revolution. This era was, of course, the apogee of Britain’s maritime domination. Thus, I am suggesting that part of what rendered Snell’s and Talbot’s gender nonconformity acceptable in wartime was how their memoirs reflected back a soothing image of British imperial masculinity to metropolitan audiences.

Drawing heavily from contemporary decolonial theory, I argue that Talbot’s and Snell’s memoirs and performances moved them from a position of marginalization toward an alliance with the dominant through a phenomenon that Jasbir Puar and others describe as “homonationalism.” Although it has been deployed in many ways since 2005, I am using the term to signify the ways in which queer politics and identities are involved in state formation and to signify “modernity.” By invoking this term, I risk creating an anachronism, since it was originally conceived to describe the post 9/11 moment. Yet, I see many of the same phenomena that Puar accounts for in the twenty-first century happening within Snell’s and Talbot’s narratives—namely, how homonationalism authorizes “affective investments in discourses of freedom, liberation, and rights” for some historically marginalized groups but not for others.⁹ I apply Puar’s ideas about homonationalism re-creating a new politics of exclusion to thinking about why figures such as Snell and Talbot were not only tolerated but celebrated during an age when the British Empire was rapidly expanding through almost constant warfare. Puar argues that certain forms of “heteronormatively acceptable gayness and queerness” are rendered “tolerable by some subjects’ patriotism, performed both by their comportment and consumption” and through their juxtaposition with “markers of racial/sexual excess, located in the pathological bodies.”¹⁰ For Puar, these pathological bodies are mostly Muslim, non-Western men who become abject through a neo-Orientalist process. Through their memoirs, Snell and Talbot created a very similar “politics of exclusion” in which they aligned themselves with the dominant forces of masculinity, patriotism, and imperialism.

The paper’s first section clarifies my treatment of gender identity and sexual behavior within a historically sensitive and theoretically-informed context. On the most basic level, I explain my use of pronouns. Throughout my discussion, I refer to Snell and Talbot with the pronouns “her” and “she” or as “woman” or “female” based solely on the fact that both of their authorized (auto)biographies employ these specific terms. That said, Snell’s and Talbot’s expressed gender identity remains highly fluid in both the historical record and in their literary productions. Both

⁸ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), xviii and Laura Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 5.

⁹ Jasbir Puar, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 336-9, 336.

¹⁰ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 140.

Snell and Talbot continued to don masculine dress to varying degrees after they were discharged from the army. This choice might have had to do with their sense of gender identity or, as I discuss in the full paper, it might have been part of their extended marketing of the “woman warrior” persona in a variety of media. “Transgender” did not emerge as a contextual category until the 1990s, and as David Valentine suggests, “to imagine historical subjects as ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ or as ‘transgender’ ignores the radically different understandings of self and the contexts that underpinned practices and lives of historical subjects.”¹¹ I am, therefore, highly skeptical of labeling Snell’s and Talbot’s gender identity beyond saying that both were “queer” or “gender non-conforming.” Queer theory offers the most useful (and least anachronistic) lens with which to approach these historical subjects, in that, as Annamarie Jagose notes, “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies within the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex [itself problematic], gender and sexual desire.”¹² With regard to their sexual lives, both Snell and Talbot engaged in sex with men and women at different times and in different economic and social contexts. Of greater interest than labels is examining how and why Snell and Talbot repeatedly drew attention to the tension between their female morphology and their male dress and what the consequences or advantages of that non-conformity were in both military and civilian life.

The paper’s second section examines how Snell’s and Talbot’s gendered self-fashioning reproduced systems of oppression during their military service. As section one makes clear, finding a place in Revolutionary-era society proved difficult for Snell and Talbot once they left the military. Therefore, I argue that it is not surprising that both Snell and Talbot represented themselves as highly invested in military imperialism and British nationalism in their memoirs. Yet, this “buy in” to British imperialism came at a cost to the colonial subjects, cis-gendered women, and foreigners they encountered while pursuing their own form of queer subjectivity. This section explores how Snell and Talbot did not challenge the terms of their queer marginalization. Rather, they sought purchase into the dominant by subjugating others. This phenomena was not unique to Snell and Talbot, but rather describes a much more widespread process of participating in a master/slave dialectic. Drawing on theoretical work by Diane Prosser MacDonald, I demonstrate that Snell’s and Talbot’s memoirs, while destabilizing heteronormativity and highlighting gender performativity, also worked to bolster racial hegemony and patriarchy in ways that highlight the unsettling relationship between queer historicism and the history of imperialism.

Always careful to avoid anachronism, the paper contextualizes Snell’s and Talbot’s memoirs within their own moment, discussing how ideas about ethics and affect circulated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The main marker of the moral subject was his or her ability to participate in sensibility. Beginning with Shaftesbury in the late seventeenth century, English moral philosophy, especially the work of David Hume and Adam Smith, began to conceive of variants of sensibility as a foundational to human nature.¹³ Although there were myriad subtle differences between articulations of sensibility, sensibility can be understood generally as the belief that human beings have an innate capacity to sympathize with others, including literary

¹¹ David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 30.

¹² Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 3.

¹³ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) and Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)

characters. This capacity, in turn, aids individuals in making moral judgments. Further, the instructive potential of sensibility can be strengthened through reading, positioning texts as major resources for moral education.¹⁴ The military memoirs of some of Talbot's and Snell's male contemporaries embraced the tenets of sensibility, using identification with suffering as a means to critique the human cost of conventional warfare. In contrast, Snell and Talbot denied both reader and character appeals to sensibility. Instead, they allied themselves with traditional masculine aggression and conservative forms of nationalism to claim legitimacy.

The paper concludes by returning to the issue of sensitivity to historical context. Drawing on representations of women's participation in military and political violence in England and France by Edmund Burke and Robert Southey, I demonstrate that Snell's and Talbot's denial of sensibility was a significant departure from eighteenth-century rhetorical norms surrounding women and war. In the end, I suggest that narratives such as Snell's and Talbot's ask us to rethink what complicity feminist and/or queer historicism should own in the perpetuation of global military violence and racial oppression. Snell and Talbot embraced the European, male privilege associated with their military personas to first "pass" as men among their colleagues and later to market mass-produced, jingoistic narratives, performances, and images to the populace at the imperial center. That neither Snell nor Talbot could integrate into civilian life underscores why they might have felt the need to disenfranchise others in order to enfranchise themselves. Yet, feminist and queer scholarship has a responsibility not only to celebrate these women for their physical bravery, but also to hold them accountable for their political compromises.

¹⁴ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 4.