

# Conference 1

## **Gender, War and Culture: From Colonial Conquest, Standing Armies and Revolutionary Wars to the Wars of Nations and Empires (1650s-1910s)**

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### **Comment on**

#### **PANEL II: GENDERING THE HISTORY OF EARLY MODERN AND REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE**

1. **Consolidating States, Professionalizing Armies, and Controlling  
Violence in the Long-term Aftermath of the Thirty Years War**  
Peter H. Wilson, University of Hull, Department of History
2. **War and Gender in Colonial and Revolutionary Central and South  
America and the Caribbean**  
Catherine Davies, University of Nottingham, Department of Spanish,  
Portuguese & Latin American Studies
3. **War, Violence and Gender in Colonial and Revolutionary North  
America**  
Serena Zabin, Carleton College, Department of History

I would like to thank Karen and Dirk for their invitation to be a part of this innovative project, albeit from the margins (in my role as commentator, but also chronologically marginal, since I work on late medieval and sixteenth-century war and society) and it is from those margins that I will be speaking, in the main. I thank also the colleagues whose papers I was privileged to read.

First, I think it is useful to name the nature of this enterprise: each of the contributors is trying to synthesize existing scholarship in their named period and region and also reach beyond it, especially where they see limitations. In other words, they hope to accomplish a synthetic essay that reaches forward, that points to new territory, partly in the very act of synthesis- in the new combinations, patterns, that emerge—and partly in their self-conscious effort to point out limitations of existing scholarship, and to suggest other lines of inquiry or other viewpoints. We need to name this kind of synthesis because I think it is important to note how damned difficult it is to do this. It is one I have experience with as a textbook author. I have faced the problem: for example, how do you write a narrative that combines the new cultural history and political history in novel ways when the scholarship that does just that is thin on the ground, except regarding events like the French Revolution?

In fact, trying to write a new synthesis, one that will break new ground, when very little of the work you're relying on envisions the ground or shares the ground you're trying to stand on – is difficult to the point of impossible. Peter Wilson has the hardest task in some respects, given the outsized presence of John Lynn's work, and military revolution scholarship generally. It's not just the question of conclusions of a scholar like Lynn that might pose a problem, it's their entire approach; it's the questions they ask and don't ask, for the purposes of your project. Much of the work you've had to draw on is still talking about women in war, not gender in war, for example, some of it – much of it—fails to reimagine categories of historical significance to include women, indeed is still asking where women fit into established categories, much less asking how the discourse of gender shifts and what work gender does in various times and places.

Thus, I acknowledge the difficulty of what you're trying to do and I admire how you've done it, and I record my reluctance to be so presumptuous as to suggest anything to you. But I want to honor the workshop mode we're in, so I will draw on my voice from the margins to suggest a few stratagems to get around the limits of the scholarship at hand.

In that spirit, then: What has struck me about working on early medieval warrior culture, Renaissance warrior culture, teaching material on the Great War, (in other words, on the margins of “modern” warfare) are the different questions scholars are willing to ask (or, perhaps, are permitted to ask, given their sources) depending on the period they’re working on. Interestingly, the work on war and culture that has blossomed around the Great War when we had begun to ask the question (such as Marilyn Lake has) why on earth would men chose to do this and then celebrate it afterwards, in other words seeing it as a cultural and gender problem, unites historians of pre-modern war and the world war period. Medieval historians and scholars of literature have been nuancing the questions we ask about warrior culture, particularly masculinity, indeed foregrounding masculinity as the central problem of medieval culture. They have addressed problems that don’t concern us as much in the early modern and modern periods about the relationship of clerical masculinity to warrior masculinity, for example. Their specific concerns and conclusions may not be directly applicable, but their methods and approaches are, and that’s what I want to underline. They remind us, first, that there is always more than one masculinity afoot in a given time and place, even within given individuals: we should perhaps not ask about “masculinity” but “masculinities.” Naming it this way helps us remember that it is a construct, or rather a hodge-podge of constructs and possibilities, always malleable and shifting, a “soft assembly” of attributes. (Overing) Masculinity is performed rather than being embodied. (Some of the work you are drawing on enables this kind of analysis but not all of it does.)

Secondly, riveted as they must be by problematic texts such as Beowulf, medieval scholars can see more clearly than we who work in other periods that warrior culture and identity is always in crisis, always in the process of defining itself, reimagining itself, re-justifying itself. What strikes me as I watch my colleagues wrestling with the early modern period is how the modernity narrative keeps trumping our efforts to tell a more complicated story. Can we do more to get it off the stage? In other words, the growth of the state and military institutions still makes it hard to see them, and the attendant masculinities, and so forth. I also think it is important to note that medieval scholars would take issue with the assumption that

entering the world of warfare means a person has to “adopt the masculine position in order to be successful.” (Davies citing Cohn’s work.)

So, what are my specific suggestions?

- 1) I agree with Peter Wilson that to be useful for the reader, the exact structure and limits of early modern war have to be spelled out. (Which reminds me to say that we don’t want to produce a book that will preach to the choir... he is absolutely right that the needs of the audience must be met – and all three of the essays I read succeeded in keeping this in mind). That said, IF we are trying to appreciate men’s choices, their communities as soldiers, wouldn’t we profit from looking at them through some other lens, that might enable us to see men’s lives in multiple dimensions? If warrior masculinity was defined partly in reaction to clerical masculinity in the middle ages (and vice versa), wouldn’t we profit from looking, in the early modern period, at artisan culture? At urban violence, for example? Can we link lower-class men’s ability to sustain a culture of forbearance to the communities of origin (like say, Denise Winter does with regards to men in the ranks in WW1?) Thus setting libertine male warriors in perspective, and perhaps also seeing more about low-class women’s lives that might help us. I thus agree with Peter Wilson that “armies shared much with the rest of early modern corporate society”, so I am gently suggesting folding in some of that literature. We need to define war more broadly, because your average social historian won’t do it for us. (sex workers, etc.)
- 2) I would also suggest thinking about the links between women’s activities and men’s– not just what did women do, but HOW did what they do affect men? How did women’s spectator role at reviews contribute to male culture? Was it a contribution to discipline, to “unit cohesion’ because it was itself a form of discipline? How does disdain and contempt for women camp followers in fact reflect their vital role? They must be held in contempt because their position is destabilizing?

- 3) I think it is interesting where our efforts at analysis hit the wall, so to speak, hit some irreducible quality, such as when Serena Zabin talks about the shared ideology of battle-tested manliness, the fact that Europeans and Indians seemed to share martial ideals of manliness. I don't doubt her very interesting conclusions (and I especially like the way she shows difference across cultures) but I think it's important to keep open the discussion of what this might mean. Especially, I want to ask, isn't martial manliness, the seeming commonality of it that unites men, the ultimate illusion? Don't we want to unpack it, see its operations? At the very least, it coexisted with other definitions and practices of masculinity. This is a point that has been made – by, among others, Jon Dewald – with respect to the upper-classes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within Europe, for instance. Not all upper-class men were warriors, and that fact has to be folded into our understanding of how warrior masculinity was produced and performed.
- 4) A point about continuity across chapters: I noted with interest Serena's mention of the way women's participation in the aftermath of American Revolution was limited to performing the cultural work of bereft widows and I want to note how important women's role as memory makers, as keeping and *defining* the memory of war is, and urge that it be developed as a theme by other authors wherever possible.
- 5) A final suggestion for other authors. Catherine Davies, as well as Peter Wilson concludes her essay by noting the limitations of what we can say about gender, owing to the limits of the work that's been done. ... I think this is an important intellectual move because it helps end with a problematization of gender as an analytical category, and the way it tends to normalize itself. I also note the productive suggestions about the way gender combines and recombines with class, ethnicity etc. in Catherine's case study. In short, ending with questions is a useful way to get hide-bound Europeanists – of which there are still many – to pay attention to what we can learn about gender and war that is of use to Europeanists by looking across the pond or around the world.