Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture, 1689–1815

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At the end of December 1756, Admiral John Byng was put on trial for breaching the *Articles of War*, instructions set out by the Royal Navy in 1749 to establish and regulate martial behaviour. Byng, who had commanded a fleet of ships during the Battle of Minorca in the late spring of 1756, was accused of failing to do his utmost during the combat. After an indecisive fight against a French fleet, Byng's ships were in serious need of repair. Instead of engaging the enemy for a second time, he elected to retreat with his badly-damaged ships to nearby Gibraltar, thus leaving the waters open for capture. His failure to act meant that Minorca (a British property since 1708) fell to the French, and Byng promptly became the subject of British resentment. He was immediately arrested on his return to England.

In defending himself, Byng drew upon an argument which had been successful in the trial of Admiral Lestock, who had been court-martialled under a similar accusation a decade earlier. Byng contended that he had done his duty by following the standard naval instructions and regulations, 'because if inferior Officers may judge for themselves, there is an End of all Discipline' (p. 78). But while Lestock had argued that 'cool courage' exemplified military excellence better than hot-bloodedness, Byng was more actively hostile, arguing that to have too much courage was brutish. Drawing parallels between his actions and those of international soldier-authors such as Antoine de Pas de Feuquières and Marquess Santa Cruz de Marcenado, 'Byng openly aligns himself with the international officer class and, more broadly, the civil(ian) world, for in parading his reading, Byng suggests that his military identity might be compatible with other identities, including the man of letters' (p. 79). In this argument, good soldierly conduct did not derive from the heated bravery of the body, but was rather produced by maintaining a thorough command of military rules and written material, enabling an officer to make a calculated decision in accordance with his study.

Ultimately, Byng's efforts to defend his actions were for naught. He was found guilty of breaching the *Articles of War*, and in March 1757 was executed by gunshot on the deck of the *Monarch*, where he had been held since his sentencing.

Byng's trial (and the discussion thereof that circulated in the mid-1750s) is just one of the five court-martials

of military officers that Julia Banister examines in her latest work, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, along with a range of other texts that probe the manners, modes, and makeup of soldiers throughout the century. At its core, Banister contends with the 18th-century debate over what it meant to be a military man. Could all men learn how to perform soldierly duties, if provided with the correct discipline and instruction from a trained expert? And if so, did this professionalism diminish the honour of the soldier who fought for pay rather than for the love of his country? Alternatively, did military prowess demand qualities more innate, such as bravery or endurance? In a culture that increasingly projected a professionalised military man who acted according to formal rules, what place did these qualities have in the construction of military identities? These concerns shifted over the course of the 18th century, against a backdrop of wider cultural arguments about the relationship between gender and the sexed body.

In a compelling narrative encompassing the years between 1689 and 1815, Banister discusses the competing versions of masculinity circulating during this period. Beginning with an examination of the standing army debate (which emerged at the end of the 17th century after William III petitioned to retain some soldiers on standby during peacetime), she frames the disagreement to colour all subsequent discussion about military masculinity. In favour of a standing army was the genuine threat of a foreign invasion: Louis XIV was harbouring James II in France, where James' son and grandson would also later draw support, and a standing army, engaging men whose service rendered them skilled and experienced in battle, would ensure that England was prepared for the eventuality of a Jacobite invasion. For victory, soldiers needed training, which called for an army of men specifically employed to specialise in and perfect their martial skills. Those opposed to a standing army, fearful of the oppressive power that William could wield over England with a military force at his fingertips, fell back on an argument that employed the rhetoric of masculine essentialism. For these critics, Englishmen were 'soldiers by instinct' (p. 16) and needed only to take up arms when necessary to excel in battle – thus positioning militarism as natural to the male body.

At this point, Banister breaks off to discuss how essentialist ideas about masculinity were difficult to reconcile with early 18th-century ideals of politeness, and critics struggled to make politeness compatible with militarism. Sir Richard Steele's journalistic endeavours initially pressed a connection between polite performance and modern militarism, 'championing the modern military man to the civic ideal of citizen-soldiering' (p. 27), but was ultimately, Banister argues, unable to sustain this argument. Later in the century, James Boswell eventually concluded that the process of self-discipline needed to become polite was of a different nature to the discipline of becoming a soldier.

In the second and third chapters, Banister turns to a series of military trials that took place in the 1740s and 1750s. The first set, the trials of Admirals Mathews and Lestock in 1746-7, which arose from Lestock's failure to engage enemy ships in the Mediterranean, highlight the debate over whether soldiers should follow common naval practice or individual officer's orders. Lestock argued that he had merely followed protocol; for Mathews, it was inconceivable that Lestock could be regarded as an ideal military man if he avoided fighting when so commanded by his superior officer. This strategy did not pay off: the trials occurred during a period when the navy was rapidly standardising, and Lestock's appeal to formalised naval practices was more convincing than Mathews' espousal of masculine essentialism. As a result, Lestock was acquitted but Mathews was removed from his position.

However, the outcome of the two trials was not compatible with public opinion. Although the courts had found in favour of an argument that rested upon the standardisation of military behaviour, popular resistance implied that many felt that this modernisation was merely performative and therefore shallow. This, Banister argues, impacted the outcome of Admiral Byng's trial ten years later. Reusing the Lestockian strategy, Byng's championing of naval rules and discipline nevertheless contrasted unfavourably with popular celebrations of the military man who enlisted in a patriotic fervour and acted with gleeful disregard to danger.

Following from her discussion of these trials, Banister turns towards the trends of gothic and sentimental literature that developed during the second half of the century. Beginning the fourth chapter with a solid reading of Henry Carey's 1737 burlesque *The Dragon of Wantley*, she argues that the mid-century interest in

the chivalric hero challenged notions of gender that originated from the body. As novelists and critics alike turned curious eyes to the gothic past, the historical knight was transformed into a surrogate for the modern military man, with chivalric honour as a prototype for politeness. In this reading, the 'old hero' (as Banister terms him) who took up arms in defence of political liberty could be remembered nostalgically as a champion of civic virtue.

Yet this gothic knight was not universally beloved: David Hume viewed chivalry as a foreign import, and therefore suspect, while Richard Hurd regarded it as the product of a society perpetually at war. Meanwhile, Horace Walpole read the gothic knight's body as 'irrational, excessive, and so supernatural' (p. 120) – hardly a suitable model for the 18th-century military man. For all of these culturemakers (none of whom were necessarily hostile to the gothic), the gothic knight was an unnatural figurehead of a past age. By contrast, literature of sensibility was better equipped to incorporate both the modern military man and the old hero. Reading sensibility as 'a turn to feeling and thus to the body' and the 'blushes, tears and swoons' that feeling produced (p. 123), Banister argues that sentimental works fettered the role that man's capacity for feeling played when men engaged in military action. For Adam Ferguson, for example, sympathy helped men to forge bonds with others, and therefore 'military action should be directed towards communal action' (p. 135). Concurrently, celebrations of the 'warrior-savage' in works such as Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe* (1771) and Henry Mackenzie's novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771) were particularly important for representing the old hero as a soldier with great capacity for feeling, who ought to be better regarded by civil society.

Two more military trials from the late 1770s – those of Admirals Augustus Keppel and Hugh Palliser – are the subjects of the sixth chapter. In a society where notions of heroism were now increasingly shaped by newspaper reports, the military hero became a celebrity in his own right, and Banister addresses the issues of officers who found their personal lives the subject of newspaper gossip. As their private actions and behaviours were made public for a scandal-hungry readership, these men were tasked with contemplating what it meant to be a public figure – as well as what it meant to be authentically male.

Finally, Banister turns to the early 18th century and Austen. Unlike her correspondent James Stanier Clarke, who applauded the rise of professionalism as a means to draw out soldiers' native courage, Austen resisted the idealisation of this new heroism. In particular (Banister argues) Austen was conscious of the conflict that financial success had with military heroism, drawing on her brothers' experience in the navy to contrast with her portrait of Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion* (1816), who has become rich from capturing prize ships. 'Battle reduced the likelihood of profit', for a badly-damaged ship could only be sold for salvage, so Wentworth likely did not prioritise combat during his military career. Banister also analyses Robert Southey's biography of Nelson and his softened view of the military, emphasising the strength of the commander's convictions versus the physical inadequacy of his body.

The 'nature' of masculinity and the male body were hotly debated subjects throughout the 18th century, and Banister's analysis maps the debate with nuance. The issue of whether male bodies were innately formed for soldiering or were blank slates in need of training meant that beliefs about masculine nature clashed with expectations of masculine performance. This had strong implications for suppositions about politeness throughout the century: for example, Byng's positioning of himself alongside other military men of letters echoes Steele's earlier mixed efforts to form the soldier into a well-mannered dinner guest. For many critics, the idea that the polite gentleman and the heroic warrior could be one and the same stretched credulity, and the increasing professionalisation of the military was greeted with contempt.

Banister writes clearly and with conviction throughout this work, although there are several distracting typos. In one sentence, Boswell is unfortunately misnamed 'Bowell' (p. 38). In choosing her subject matter, she has drawn from a wide range of sources: trial documents; biographies and philosophical works; newspapers and pamphlets; novels from Walpole, Mackenzie, and Austen. Still, there are some unexplored avenues, even while acknowledging her conscious decision to exclude most women's conceptions of military masculinity from across the century. Considering the focus on performance, a discussion of the

military stage comedies popular during the early 1700s which contributed to the connection between militarism and national identity, such as George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1707), would have been a welcome addition. Likewise, there is no mention of Hannah Snell, who disguised herself as a man to serve in the army before exploiting her celebrity in the 1750s in a series of careers as author, performer, and publican. An examination of her public life may have served as an interesting contribution to the analysis of the mid-century enthusiasm for soldiering borne of civic feeling (as well as a complication of the essentialist ideas about masculinity that this enthusiasm produced), as well as tying into the later discussion of celebrity in the 18th century.

Despite these omissions, *Masculinity, Militarism and Eighteenth-Century Culture* is a tremendously engaging work, and essential reading for anyone interested in 18th-century military culture. Demonstrating the subtleties and shifts of militarism throughout the period, and avoiding a straightforward narrative of change, Banister draws attention to the uncertainty and discord of a society grappling with its understanding of military masculinity.

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