



## **Girls Playing at Soldiers: Destabilizing the Masculinity of War Play in Georgian Britain**

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**Abstract:** *This article destabilizes previous assumptions of the inherent masculinity of war play by examining the many forms of Georgian girls' participation. Girls may not have used professionally manufactured guns, but they did similar things with more makeshift weapons. Veterans' accounts played a key role in inspiring both boys' and girls' re-enactments. Girls' interest in war play was fuelled by complex social messaging admiring female soldiers and praising the value of martial training for both sexes. These findings highlight the need to historicize play and to recognize the pervasive influence of war in eighteenth-century girls' lives.*

**Keywords:** *war play; Georgian children; gender; girls; toys; mock drill; British Army; Napoleonic War*

George Morland's painting *Children Playing at Soldiers* (see fig. 1) was quickly published in 1788 by J. R. Smith and had "great and lasting" popularity for its endearing and accurate portrayal of childhood (Gilbey and Cuming 71, 203-204). A brief glance confirms the existing historiography of British children's war play.<sup>1</sup> Boys of seemingly varied class background are loosely arrayed in a line, instructed by the eldest boy in the nicest dress. They wear makeshift conical caps, carry wooden weapons, and their regimental colours are comprised of a piece of silk tied to a stick. Most of the girls in the picture are passively watching from the periphery. First impressions suggest that this is boys playing at soldiers.

Most scholarly inquiry into war play in Britain in various time periods has offered a similar impression of the inherent masculinity of playing at soldiers. Despite noting that girls could play at soldiering with boys in the Napoleonic Wars era, Kathryn Gleadle emphasized difference, concentrating on the fact that girls' war play was isolated to private, domestic settings (339-42). Graham Dawson's influential study of the "boy culture" of soldier play in his post-Second World War



Figure 1: George Henry Morland, *Children Playing at Soldiers* (1788).  
Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library.

childhood only briefly acknowledged his female playmate (264). Modern and historical inquiry into war play tends to erase or separate female involvement.<sup>2</sup>

Eva Änggård's study of modern children's warrior play provides the most telling example. She stated that such make-believe "attracts boys." Rather than questioning this when faced with a girl who wanted to join in, Änggård instead focused on the boys' refusal to let her. Ironically, Änggård also observed that "researchers . . . tend to . . . be blind to activities that deviate from typical gender patterns . . ." (7). By regarding gender as a rigid binary "instead of situated, temporary, and flexible discursive constellations," she argued, "research itself serves to confirm gender-stereotyped expectations" (7).

The traditional play researcher observing a scene similar to that in Morland's *Children Playing at Soldiers* would likely ignore the girls in the picture or highlight their differences. They would point out the fact that the girls were not wearing uniforms or carrying weapons, contrasting female pacifism with male militance. Morland, however, included at least one girl who defies that explanation. She was placed to the right of the boy bearing the regimental colours and clearly served as the company's drummer, with a toy drum slung around her neck and two drumsticks in her right hand. The golden-haired damsel in the blue dress peeking out from behind the kneeling infantryman was also presented as eager to join the line. Among other things, a close reading indicates that the drummer girl has been significantly placed beside the lead figure, and that equal numbers of boys and girls are included.<sup>3</sup> The painting's title provides a further hint that the girls be considered part of the game. Rather than "Boys Skating," or "Boys Bathing," as Morland dubbed some of his other works (the latter of which appears to include a young girl), Morland called it "*Children Playing at Soldiers*," suggesting his intention that viewers recognize the gender inclusivity of the scene.

This article will foreground girls' interest in playing at soldiers by looking at descriptions from a variety of sources. Unlike today's play researchers, historians cannot directly observe children's play in the past. Accounts of children's leisure are invariably filtered through the eyes of adults, mostly from autobiographers looking back on their youth. Military and civilian court records also offer an occasional glimpse of children at play, as does art like Morland's. Produced for a commercial market, paintings, novels, and other fictional representations of war play were

<sup>1</sup> The experience of make-believe is found under many different terms in child development studies, including "symbolic play," "pretend play," and "dramatic play." Each has slightly different characteristics, but this article employs the term "war play" to refer to children's adoption of soldier roles and identities for leisured amusement. This has been taken to include physical emulation of drills and battles as well as imaginary deployment of toy armies.

<sup>2</sup> See also Bourke (161); Paris (71); Selig (142); and E. Williams (23).

<sup>3</sup> For elaboration of the method of close

reading in visual analysis, see Brown. Morland likely intended to signify the boy's dominance by placing him on the left, as this was the position of the patriarch in early modern family portraiture conventions (Vanhaelen 129).

<sup>4</sup> The closest any memoirist came was Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck (132) and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (69), but both of these women were marvelling at how different they now were from their child selves, not at the uniqueness of a girl interested in military pursuits. On the integrity and value of autobiographical reflections on childhood to

created from keen observation in order to resonate with a broader audience. This article has captured material on the British Isles as well as garrison towns like Gibraltar for much of the long eighteenth century.

The appearance of girls in these adult-generated accounts of war play says as much about the elder observers as it does about its youthful subjects. They were clearly not blind to the notion that soldiering might appeal to girls. No one expressed horror at this idea, nor did they emphasize its exceptionality.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they implicitly marked out those “temporary and flexible discursive constellations” wherein girls engaged in war games. Autobiographers recalling their Napoleonic War-era childhoods emphasized the pervasiveness of war as a unique feature of their past, but they did not characterize it as a time of when gender conventions were especially blurred.

This article shows that, by playing army, Georgian children could move beyond an adult reality where soldiering was masculine. It was actually a reality for children, too, since young boys could conceivably serve in the army or navy, but girls could not. The first section of this article presents the evidence of such reality-defying play found in various biographies of this period. Girls were far less likely than boys to use commercially produced weaponry, but they willingly participated in mock soldiering with more makeshift accoutrements. The toy market may have gendered war play as male, but make-believe was considerably less driven by commercial toys than it is today, which left a space for girls to pretend to be soldiers alongside their male playmates.

The next section goes on to explore the factors that influenced the storylines and scenarios of children's war play, arguing that most messaging about military campaigns was readily accessible—and of interest—to both sexes. Where Gleadle and Kate Watson have emphasized the relatively short-term role of the volunteer movement in motivating children's war play, this study will highlight the long-standing influence of the regular army and its veterans (Gleadle 338-41; Watson 102). Long before the volunteer movement, generations of British children witnessed recruiting parties, battle reports, and demobilizations. They heard about the carnage and observed its effects first-hand in the ragged amputees who returned from conflicts abroad. The sights and sounds of soldiering, along with war news, sparked imitative play for both boys and girls.

The final section suggests that soldier play both inspired and was influenced by the inconsistency of adult attitudes toward children's military exposure. Girls who played at soldiers could thus be seen as simultaneously reflecting and rejecting adult conditioning. In questioning gender norms of war play, this article builds upon recent work by Mary Clare Martin showing that gender was less of a barrier in nineteenth-century children's recreation than it was for adults. These findings shed new light on the deep historical roots of the Victorian advice literature that saw little danger in prepubescent girls playing aggressive games with boys (Gorham 75, 79-80).

This article seeks to highlight not only the transgressive power of play, but also the pervasive influence of war in all children's lives in the long eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Morland's painting of girls and boys pretending to be soldiers was bucolic and serene, yet the scene would not have presented itself to Morland without the bloody backdrop of the Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War, not to mention ongoing concerns with French belligerence. Aside from the threat of invasion, British youngsters were largely far from conflict zones, yet their play shows that adults did not—could not—shield girls from war.

### Reality-Defying Play

Girls could pretend to be soldiers because the Georgian toy market did not pervade children's worlds to the same extent as modern toy manufacturing.<sup>6</sup> Like today, professionally built toys nudged more boys than girls toward war play. By the late eighteenth century, J. H. Plumb observed, there were toy "soldiers and forts of every variety for the potential soldier . . ." (89).<sup>7</sup> Both boys and girls played with paper and cloth soldiers, but the wood and lead versions were more exclusively male (Blakiston 2; Howitt 21-22; Loftus 5-6). The residents of an all-boys school made frequent use of a set of "wooden soldiers" and were inspired by Nelson's funeral to recreate the procession in miniature, with a makeshift coffin "followed by little men, like soldiers and sailors, with flags and various funereal insignia" (Husenbeth 103). In India, British and Indian children of sufficient means could purchase crude scale replicas of mounted British officers "in full regimentals and cocked hat" (Sherwood 403). Their familiarity with model soldiers made some small fry feel equally relaxed with the flesh-and-blood version. Uniformed

historians of play, see Gleadle (336-37); Humphries; and Maynes (118-23).

<sup>5</sup> On the need to recognize this darker side of play, see Eichberg (38).

<sup>6</sup> Martin also observed the more gendered nature of commercial toys, and the less gendered use of their home-made counterparts (69-70).

<sup>7</sup> Bourke points out that "significant production of toy soldiers started in



the 1730s” (162), becoming three-dimensional and made of more affordable tin and lead in the 1760s.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ball (2); Sherer (132); Thompson (184-85); and Tonna (68-69).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the examples that follow, see Husenbeth (110) and Tonna (49).

<sup>10</sup> Morland’s drum is clearly a toy because it lacks the size, strap configuration, and regimental insignia of a “real” drum. For examples of other musical instruments in martial play, see Cobbold (122); Sibbald (264); and Tonna (49).

<sup>11</sup> “There is no evidence that girls played with the guns

men had young children—especially boys—gravitate toward them in a manner not unlike that of mascots at modern amusement parks.<sup>8</sup> Model soldiers both fuelled and responded to a desire for martial play among Georgian youth.

Commercial weapons were marketed to boys and were more likely to remain in their hands. Boys of sufficient means procured wooden guns and swords.<sup>9</sup> An eleven-year-old was able to get his servant to blacken a mop handle so he could affix it to a “small ‘gunstock’” he had bought to play soldier with his teenaged brother and other local youth (Jerrod 33). Another servant in the juvenile fiction of the time was purportedly “dispatched” to a local fair to purchase “wooden guns, tin swords, and all the requisite arms and accoutrements,” needed by three brothers (*Little Deserter* 8). Close to a hundred boys in Flushing composed themselves into a mock volunteer regiment with “wooden muskets, halberds, and pikes,” along with “cross-belts of white linen or . . . paper” (Buckingham 28). Musical instruments naturally lent themselves to martial play and increased the pomp and pageantry of the make-believe army as they did of its real-life counterpart. The female drummer in Morland’s painting hints at the possibility that these toys were not as strongly gendered, but this also depended on the context.<sup>10</sup> Boarding school boys in Staffordshire managed to acquire an actual regimental drum from the disbanded Staffordshire Loyal Volunteers (Husenbeth 110). It is likely that the military toys that most closely emulated adult versions were more exclusively male.

Play involving gunpowder was arguably an even greater approximation of real war. Again, the evidence indicates that boys were the only participants, though Lois G. Schwoerer has speculated that girls must have occasionally played with real guns.<sup>11</sup> Gunpowder held fascination for boys of all social ranks, and they found creative ways to procure it. One little lad begged the soldier who boarded in his London lodgings in the 1740s “for a Cartridge of Powder” to play with.<sup>12</sup> A schoolboy of a 1756 novel made “Crackers, Rockets &c.” and blew off the roof of his father’s coach with his military play (*Life and Memoirs* 22-23). A group of urchins in Flushing, fired with anti-Jacobin zeal in the 1790s, managed to get their hands on “several pounds of gunpowder” to explode *sans coulottes* in effigy. This resulted in an accident where one of the boys lost his eyebrows and burned his face, though he later recovered (Buckingham 29-30). Two wealthier men describe owning, as children, small operational

artillery pieces. One had a series of “little brass cannons” and another had “a model iron cannon about eighteen inches long, with a musket bore” (Blakiston 3; South 19). A Jacobite soldier in the rebellion of 1745 affectionately wrote home to his son promising that he would bring him home “a bon[n]y Gune” (McDonald). Gunpowder and manufactured toy weapons existed in a predominantly male domain.

The exclusive masculinity of war play was less apparent for amusements that did not rely on the commercial market. Makeshift toys and found objects played a far greater role in the play experiences of Georgian children than they do for those of today. The burgeoning market of readymade toys catered to middling and elite households. Labourers’ children had to be more creative. One chronicler noted, for example, that those who could not afford to purchase wooden guns “were obliged to content themselves with such weapons as they could shape out of the hedge . . .” (Tonna 49). Plebeian poet John Clare recalled collecting “red and blue flowers for cockades to play at soldiers” (33). One Chelsea pensioner’s grandson shouldered his grandfather’s crutch as a substitute gun (*Adventures* 103). A pauper apprentice deployed his rakes and hoes as muskets and drilled livestock as his soldiers (Shipp, *Memoirs* 1:11). With fertile young imaginations, the natural environment could equip vast armies.

Scholars of modern play have dubbed such activity as “*bricolage*,” and have seen it as a form of youth resistance. Although the term was not employed in the eighteenth century, it is clear that similar concepts existed. Parenting manuals advocated for the educational value of children using “improvised toys” made from wax or clay and for altering readymade playthings into their component parts (Dyer 36-37). *Bricolage* can be found in modern boys’ war play when adults have banned the purchase of toy guns.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, no studies have explored whether modern girls—for whom gendered war toy marketing is an even greater barrier—have used *bricolage* to resist adult strictures on war play.

Their Georgian counterparts certainly did. Two rather sheltered middle-class girls spent a happy day engaged in soldier play with a labourer’s children who taught them how to make grenadier’s caps out of rushes (Howitt 115). A clergyman’s young daughter and son acted out vicious engagements with the French in the fields behind their home during the invasion scare of 1804. Each armed with a stick, they used them as swords and decapitated “Frenchmen”

that boys in their circle of family and friends possessed, but given the nature of childhood and the fact that some young women used guns later suggests that they probably did” (Schwoerer 153).

<sup>12</sup> See “Abraham Dixon.” For the likelihood that the quartermaster sergeant would “sell a little powder to . . . the boys who wish to shew their loyalty on his Majesty’s birth-night . . .,” see Williamson (90).

<sup>13</sup> Ellen Jordan and Angela Cowan (732-33) situate the origin of the term and its association with resistance in Hebdige (103).

<sup>14</sup> Though fictionalized, the uniqueness of this tale is paradoxical testimony to its authenticity. The female protagonist attested equally to her “great delight” in these games and her terror of the French, which reflects the tone of other verifiable accounts.

<sup>15</sup> Husenbeth talks about “sham fights,” where one group attacked, and another defended, a sod castle (118-19). In his fictional biography, Ephraim Bates was a schoolboy “exercising Soldiers, raising Banks, and sinking Trenches, to imitate Things he had seen in Books of War” (*Life and Memoirs* 18).

nettles. On other occasions, the sticks became guns, which the children systematically loaded, aimed, and fired as perfectly drilled soldiers (Lefroy 76).<sup>14</sup> In the 1780s, a ten-year-old girl took great delight in re-enacting ancient campaigns on a miniature battlefield with her male cousin, deploying hazelnuts and holly berries as soldiers (Schimmelpenninck 132). In 1790, before the fear of Napoleon’s invasion, Musselburgh schoolgirls divided into teams of “Scotch and English” and perpetrated mock raids across an imaginary border (Somerville 22). Generations of pupils engaged in such activities, and they were not limited to schools.<sup>15</sup> Rural children stormed both “paper and mud forts” to recreate the stories of their soldier grandfathers’ exploits (Shipp, *Military* 35). In the early 1800s, a girl donned a muff as a grenadier’s cap and shouldered her father’s cane as a musket (Tonna 69). Freed of the financial and cultural restrictions of the toy market, girls engaged in *bricolage* for more gender-inclusive war play.

Girls took both men’s and women’s part in war play, where boys never departed from male roles.<sup>16</sup> The accounts of girls in traditional women’s roles largely depicted them as presenting the colours to the troops, but never as acting as camp-followers. This is perhaps because they come from middle-class sources. Charlotte Tonna made her brother a flag by “tacking sundry pieces of silk to an old broomstick . . .” and ceremoniously delivered them to his corps, but she also acted the soldier and drilled with him on other occasions (49, 69).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the girl who recalled that pretending to be volunteers and drilling on the streets “was something which we *girls* had nothing to do,” (Howitt 21) identified herself and her sister as somewhat unique. Their need to watch the boys from afar was at least as much connected with the fact that they had no male playmates and no brothers as it was to an unseemliness of girls engaging in martial play (Howitt 21-22).

Girls did not limit themselves to presenting the colours or simply observing war play. Accounts of their mock drill, though markedly fewer than those of boys practising maneuvers in the streets, deserve attention. The popular story of Hannah Snell, who entered the marines in male disguise in 1747, described her at the age of ten, having “formed a Company of young Soldiers among her Play-fellows,” with herself as “chief Commander” (17). Though Snell was far from typical, her actions did not garner shock or condemnation in 1730s Worcester. Instead, her army of playfellows was reportedly “admired all over the Town” (17). As a girl,



Charlotte Tonna not only strategized with her friends about how to defend her mother from Bonaparte, she also performed military maneuvers with her adored younger brother, “march[ing] and countermarch[ing] . . . till [she] could not stand for fatigue” (50, 69). A Gibraltar colonel’s daughter acted “as a sort of drill sergeant” (Cobbold 48) to a monkey, leading him through military exercises after she realized that he would imitate her actions. It was the artilleryman’s daughter who served as her nursemaid, rather than her brother, who gave her the idea. Two fictionalized accounts of veterans depicted them drilling their grandchildren, and one described the grandmother drilling along with them (Shipp, *Military* 35; *Adventures* 103). Although these are only a small handful of examples, their presence in a diverse selection of sources is noteworthy and becomes more significant alongside the other accounts of girls’ military amusements.

Having thus reviewed evidence of girls’ visible presence in martial play, the rest of the article will try to explain it by investigating cultural messaging that helped to inspire it.

### **Influencing Factors on Stories and Scenarios**

In playing war, Napoleonic-era children—like their modern counterparts—probably used their knowledge of contemporary military activity gleaned from a variety of sources.<sup>16</sup> There is little reason to suspect that there was any difference in the way that girls received information about the war. Existing studies indicate that ballads and newspapers combined with the presence of volunteer troops to fuel children’s—especially boys’—war play (Gleadle; Grenby 43). “Boys and Girls . . . all read of war,” Coleridge stated in his oft-quoted 1798 poem, and his observations were further supported by later recollections of Napoleonic-era childhoods (6, emphasis added). Children of both sexes eagerly consumed the contents of newspapers, either as listeners or readers (Howitt 60-62; Tonna 46). But memoirs also suggest additional ways that children, regardless of their sex, learned of battles. Both boys and girls had clear memories of the tragic death and funeral of Horatio Nelson, and both were present at the illuminations in celebration of victories (Husenbeth 103; Martineau 18; South 3, 17). Children formed part of the crowd at the Prince Regent’s residence after the triumph at Vitoria, for example. One lad among them later remembered that “Marshal Jourdan’s *baton*,” was

<sup>16</sup> William Corsaro’s modern study of socio-dramatic play also found that “boys almost always refused female roles” (122).

<sup>17</sup> For other accounts of sisters and mothers presenting colours to mock soldier boys, see Jerrold (33).

<sup>18</sup> For France in 1915, “all that the children needed to artfully and seriously play at war were the newspapers, photographs and violence that they learned to copy from their first trips to the cinema and Guignol [a puppet show] in the park” (Gleisner 166). Bourke points out that military toys are used by modern

children “to re-enact wars we have seen, heard about and imagined” (189). Corsaro adds that “kids do not simply imitate adult models in [socio-dramatic] role play; rather they continually elaborate and embellish adult models to address their own concerns” (112).

periodically presented as a trophy of the battle, to their great delight (South 20-21). Girls were also not shielded from the caricatures of Napoleon Bonaparte as a threatened invader, and both they and their male counterparts expressed their fear at seeing these images (Loftus 12; Martineau 60). There were many ways that children learned of the war, none of which significantly excluded girls.

Indeed, there was an immersive effect produced by the war effort from which girls could only have been sheltered with great difficulty. The legendary Christian Davies, who fought in the War of Spanish Succession disguised as a man, recalled being “accustomed to Soldiers, when a Girl, and delighted with seeing them exercise” (21). While more protective parents might try to shield their daughters from the *sight* of the army, it was nigh impossible to mask its sound. A man who was an eleven-year-old in 1803 later described it:

Every town was . . . a sort of garrison; in one place you might hear the “tattoo” of some youth learning to beat the drum; at another place some march or national air being practiced upon the fife, and every morning at five o’clock the bugle-horn was sounded through the streets, to call the volunteers to a two hours’ drill from six to eight, and the same again in the evening; and then you heard the pop, pop, pop, of the single musket, or the heavy sound of the volley, or distant thunder of the artillery . . . (Jerrold 29)

The “sound of drum and fife” drew Mary Howitt and her sister to the nursery window, though their protective mother would never let them play drill with the neighbourhood boys (21). Boys were especially likely to run after uniformed men they met on the streets. “I do not know how it is that children seem to think soldiers a part of the common stock and what every body has a right to,” complained a Peninsular officer, after he was accosted by a tiny Southamptonite in 1813 (Thompson 185). Men in uniform were everywhere, and regular soldiers were at least as attractive as volunteers to these tiny admirers.

Children’s thirst for war play could also be sparked by hearing veterans’ stories. No scholarship has explored this, but it was probably one of the only ways for them to access the detailed personal accounts that are the best fuel for dramatic play. Unlike in the American Civil

War a few decades later, the Napoleonic Wars saw no tales of martial exploits published for children (Grenby). Boys like Leighton Dalrymple, whose father was serving on the Continent in the French Revolutionary Wars, wrote short missives eagerly requesting details of the “engagements” (Dalrymple). This is also an example of the way in which children’s own interests can help to drive the market, since a thirst for soldiers’ stories clearly existed long before such accounts peppered the pages of *Young England*, *Chums*, and other Victorian boys’ periodicals.<sup>19</sup>

Illiterate labourers’ children likely gained most of their knowledge of the wars from fireside veterans’ tales. Vivid accounts of the past horrors and glories of battle were the currency by which ragged British army veterans repaid hospitality in their travels (Burn 31). It was also a way to give tribute to fallen comrades and ensure—particularly in the decades before the 1820s, when the publishing market for memoirs grew more inclusive—that the common soldier’s role in a campaign was not forgotten.<sup>20</sup> Children were attentive recipients for these tales.<sup>21</sup> One boy was inspired to enlist after hearing the exploits of an old soldier who had served in Gibraltar in the 1780s, and another attributed his military ardour to the old seamen who related their “romantic adventures . . . with so much gusto” (*Veteran* 25-26; see also Loftus 3). When working in his uncle’s shoemaking shop, Edward Costello was ignited by the stories of an elderly co-worker who had fought at Alexandria in 1801 (2). A young boy in 1810 later recalled the graphic yarns of a veteran who was blinded in the Egyptian campaign and those of another veteran who had served in India (Cooper 10, 18). Some children were inspired to enlist after hearing these tales, but most were simply eager to re-enact the events in their leisured amusements.

Girls found a place here as well. Boys were not the only listeners to pensioners’ tales, nor were men the only tellers. As a girl in the 1780s, Mary Somerville heard stories of her father’s naval Service and took pride in his battle bravery (7-8). Though he was not a commissioned officer, Sergeant Greenleigh shared his war glories with his daughter as well.<sup>22</sup> Female soldier Hannah Snell had a very famous grandfather who had risen from the ranks to a captain lieutenantcy from his battle prowess, which, her biography implied, was the cause of her enlistment, and the military affiliation of six of her siblings in later life (13-15). Another old

<sup>19</sup> Michael Paris has written about the growth and content of this Victorian literature (68-71).

<sup>20</sup> “The Soldier’s Dream,” sung of a soldier relating the story of “how bravely” his fellow soldiers “conquered” and “How nobly they died.” “The British Soldier’s Reflection on the Continent” depicted a soldier imagining a happier future time when “these perils [of battle] to relate, / As by my side attentive sat, / My neighbours and my wife.”

<sup>21</sup> The anonymously authored *The Story of*

*the Unfortunate but Heroic Highlander Related by Himself* presents such a scene (11). For a visual depiction of a similar event in Civil War America, see “A Veteran on Furlough.” Both show girls among the audience.

<sup>22</sup> The anonymously authored *The Veteran Soldier* is dedicated to his daughter.

<sup>23</sup> Note that McClelland was Mary’s second husband, a sergeant in the 28th Regiment; she married him when she was the widow of Sergeant John Ball.

<sup>24</sup> See also Isaac Taylor’s account, and that of the fictional sergeant’s wife who had served in the West Indies

veteran helped his wife, daughter, and grandchildren “commemorat[e] the battles he had been in, with bonfires,” and re-enactments (Shipp, *Military* 35). Susan Walton argued that the tales of William Yonge’s Peninsular triumphs helped to shape his daughter’s thinking, though she was born more than a decade after Waterloo (51-56). Camp-following wives knew the value of their experiences to thrill young audiences. Sergeant McClelland’s widow related her store of harrowing Peninsular War tales to her son “many a time,” in the futile hope that it would prevent him from following in his father’s footsteps (Ball 29).<sup>23</sup> Like their husbands, veteran army wives could share their recollections outside of their families as well. During and after the war, women, like the sergeant’s wife who had an “inexhaustible fund of anecdotes,” told their own exciting war stories to people they met (Sherwood 258).<sup>24</sup>

Children’s imaginations were also fired by popular images of the female soldier in Georgian song, story, and stage.<sup>25</sup> The Howitt girls’ nanny regaled her young charges with a yarn about “the lady who had loved a sea-captain, and had fought by his side in man’s attire, and saved his life at the expense of severe wounds on her own body” (37). Possessed of a mother who sought to shelter her daughters from such sensational stories, they did not divulge the nanny’s secret, and kept their war play away from the streets and appropriately sedate. Boys were also inspired by martial heroines. John Clare affectionately recalled a boyhood friend often “repeat[ing] by heart in rhyme a story of a young lady being killd [sic] in battle by a shield ball while seeking her lover” (40).<sup>26</sup> These tales reminded children that men were not the only actors in the drama of war.

Female warrior stories resonated with some parents’ teachings of the need for girls to exhibit bravery and strength. Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck recalled her mother’s strict lessons in stoicism, which included a request that, after badly burning her hand, Schimmelpenninck show no signs of pain in order “to be like the boys of Sparta” (4).<sup>27</sup> This is an extreme case, but there are other examples of admiration for feminine courage in the Napoleonic War era. Fanny Lefroy’s fictionalized biography of Mary Lisle included an elder sister of the protagonist who vehemently opposed the family’s plan to send the girls to the countryside with their mother under the threat of a French invasion. This feisty young lady “talked of the ignominy of flight, and with glowing eye and cheek declared she would much

rather remain and share any danger there was to be shared” (Lefroy 75). Although memoirs of girlhood depict their mothers having a passive role in the face of the invasion threat, there were other models of adult femininity who inspired the martial vigour modelled by Lisle’s eldest sister. The women defending Fishguard from the French in 1797 gained much popular acclaim (Carter 137). Children thus had occasion to perceive warlike bravery as a feminine, as well as masculine, trait.

Girls’ interest in war play can thus be at least partly explained by the fact that they heard the same war tales as boys. Veteran soldiers’ and camp-followers’ stories functioned as “scripts,” similar to the role of children’s toys and literature in playing out slave narratives in the antebellum South, as observed by Robin M. Bernstein. Although veterans emphasized the hardships and horrors of war, children’s war play tended to highlight its pageantry and romance, similar to Bernstein’s observation that children’s play performances “revise rather than only reify” the literature that inspires them (163). In their imaginary battlefields and bivouacs, they could engage in gender-bending play as male soldiers, or they could transform into female camp-followers and warrior women. There were ways to avoid parental surveillance in the pursuit of these activities, but some girls may not have had to. The next section outlines the mixed attitudes toward war play, suggesting that girls’ war play emerged, in part, from this ambiguous messaging.

### **Adult Attitudes Toward War Play**

Some parents and educators applauded martial activities for girls; others saw it as exclusive to boys, and a few condemned it for both sexes. The following paragraphs will suggest that adults’ absence of clarity on its inherent masculinity helped to empower Georgian girls to engage in military make-believe. Such play clearly had a genuine attraction for children of both sexes, and their own desires can be discerned behind the jumble of opinion among grownups.

Not only was war play not always seen as exclusively male, sometimes it was seen as entirely inappropriate. Those who continued to make-believe at soldiering in the face of this opposition had an active role in shaping war play. Kathryn Gleadle emphasizes boys’ agency. This evidence of adults’ open disapproval of children who engaged in military amusements,

and “delighted in recounting the hardships she had shared” to Cinthelia’s young son and daughter on a stagecoach (Taylor 148-51; Walker 199).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Cope; *The Life, and Surprising Adventures, of Blue-Eyed Patty*; Snell; and Talbot. On their popularity, see Dugaw (150); Füssel (530-31, 534-37); Hopkin (92); and Wahrman (“Percy’s” 117-20).

<sup>26</sup> The editor concluded that this was related to the “common” tales of women disguised as servicemen (168).

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Newton observed that parents admired and encouraged stoicism



in ailing children of both sexes (129-30, 179-80). On the popularity of stoicism among certain intellectual women of this period, see Lisa Vargo (86-88). Joanne Bailey noted the importance, to parents, of “managing” emotions, but the prominence of affection and sympathy in her examples suggests that Schimmelpenninck’s methods were extreme for the time (71-93).

though not included in her article, adds fuel to her point. When he learned of his pupils’ mock drills and maneuvers, the bishop who presided over an all-male Staffordshire boarding school ordered the regiment “to disband at once” and confiscated their toy guns (Husenbeth 111). He “had too great a horror of war, to encourage a martial spirit in school boys . . .” (111). In a 1756 novel, clergymen warned a mother that her son’s “Head is turned to be a Soldier . . .” and she should “prevent it” (*Life and Memoirs* 18). Children’s literature also had an ardent pacifist message in the Napoleonic War era (Grenby). Boys who enthusiastically fired off toy cannons risked rebuke from parents and even arrest by the local constabulary (Blakiston 3; South 19). If boys’ war play persisted despite such adult opposition, then girls’ ability to engage in unsanctioned military make-believe becomes more plausible.

The restrictions listed above applied more to sons of wealthier families, but adults discouraged plebeian boys’ war play on occasion as well. A pauper apprentice emulating soldierly bearing and performing mock drill generated frequent complaints from local villagers. His master also whipped him soundly for it, but he never stopped (Shipp, *Memoirs* 2: 11-12). A low-ranking soldier’s widow (already referred to in the previous section as relating her tales of hardship as a camp-follower) had no effect in dampening her son’s martial interests (Ball 29). Sentries repeatedly blocked boys from entering the barracks. Such access was important to war play, as one lad later recalled, since it gave a vantage point to watch “with unwearied attention the progress of the drill . . . endeavouring to imitate with my mimic gun the various motions of the manual and platoon exercise” (Lewin 2). He (and likely others) had to resort to clever ruses to gain entry. This reflects Chris Rojek’s contention that play is inherently subversive (184-92). Regardless of its broader connotations, children’s persistence in engaging in war play despite adult opposition attests to the genuine enthusiasm for such activity in the hearts of the smallest Britons, including girls.

Some boys obstructed war play, however. Again, this shows that they followed their own proclivities instead of blindly deferring to the adults around them. Students at Sedgley Park School in Staffordshire who pooled their funds to set up their own mock regiment received abuse from two schoolmates. Dubbing themselves “*Mawlers*,” they acted entirely separately from and with methods averse to the pacifist bishop in charge and revelled in disrupting

orderly rows of marching lads (Husenbeth 111). On the streets of London, a servant boy mocked a sentry in 1776 to the point where the angry soldier took his hat and refused to return it (Steppler 123). Male street urchins were especially quick to condemn disorderly soldiers. From a drunken guardsman in 1753 to two riflemen jailed for riot in 1808, army misbehaviour quickly became the target of juvenile taunts.<sup>28</sup> Equally, Catholic boys in Irish garrison towns may have had less compunction to play at soldiers. There is no evidence of girls condemning boys—or even other girls—war play. Even the two young ladies who were prohibited from marching themselves still watched from their nursery window with admiration (Howitt 21). It was only much later in life that Charlotte Tonna regretted her girlhood martial enthusiasm because it had helped to encourage her brother to enter the army (69-70). Boys, on the other hand, sometimes expressed their own disapproval of martial culture and engaged in subversive play.

In showing that Napoleonic-era boys could be discouraged from martial play, it is also important to question the notion that girls were never encouraged to participate in such activity. In fact, there could be a significant military component to middle-class girls' education in this period. This was rarely justified in relation to the war effort, apart from encouraging patriotism. Rousseau's *Emile* also noted that Spartan girls' military training made them better mothers of warriors.<sup>29</sup> The daughter in one instructional short story published in 1792 confessed to relishing her history lessons of English victories (Smith 208). Although it shocked her pacifist mother into labelling her an Amazon, its presence in a didactic tale suggests that this was a relatively common feature of youthful femininity. At least some families saw warrior patriotism as a reasonable part of both boys' and girls' education. *The Lady's Magazine* issue for 1804 printed a popular song called "The Soldier's Alphabet," which had a cadence that would have made it adaptable as a lesson for young children: "A stands for *Attention*, the first word he knows, and B stands for *Bullet*, to tickle his foes, C stands for a *Charge*, which the Frenchmen all dread; And D stands for *Discharge*, which soon lays them dead . . ." (159). It was impossible to shield girls fully from the threat of Napoleon's invasion, and some parents clearly embraced it.

A few girls relished the opportunity to learn more about past and present battles. The very young Harriet Martineau grilled her teacher on French history and politics in order to better

<sup>28</sup> The drunken guardsman account can be found in Regimental Court Martial of John Whitehead (f. 205); the taunted riflemen are in Costello (7). For more accounts of taunting boys, see Regimental Court Martial of Jonathan Horsfield; and L. Williams (178-79).

<sup>29</sup> "It is not necessary for the women to carry a musket and learn the Prussian exercise, in order to be capable of bearing robust children . . .," Rousseau observed, but added that such activity was "excellent" in its ability to cultivate obedience and "to

form the constitution of the fair sex by agreeable, moderate, and salutary exercise" (22-23).

<sup>30</sup> See Shelton, esp. letters dated 29 Aug. 1812 and 1 Sep. 1813.

understand the Peninsular War and educate the family servants on the strategic significance of various victories (59-60). A ten-year-old girl found the battles of the ancients to be "objects of great study," though her much more "pacific" adult self expressed surprise at the memory (Schimmelpenninck 132). Jane Taylor's childhood papers contain drawings of fortifications with careful shading and labelling to indicate the various features such as the *glacis* and *bastion*, though her mid-nineteenth-century biographer had difficulty understanding how this could ever have been "indispensible to the completeness of a girl's education" (Taylor 16-17). Popular novels like *Clarissa* and *Tom Jones* were riddled with military terminology, fuelled by "the extensive market for military manuals and histories" of the time (Cardwell 159-60). At least one Georgian parent had reason to value girls' military knowledge. Major Robert Shelton praised his teenaged daughter Charlotte's "very useful, well executed Map of Spain and Portugal," sent to him as a birthday present during his service there.<sup>30</sup> He also wrote her frequently of his military exploits with an assumption that she was following the campaign closely through the newspapers. Evidence of girls' marital education went far beyond officers' daughters like Charlotte Shelton; most came from girls with no loved ones serving abroad. This suggests that girls' exposure to military education had little to do with their filial duties.

There are hints that some middle-class parents believed that girls could benefit from actually performing military maneuvers. Observing British missionary parents' account of a girl wielding her bamboo gun like a small sepoy in 1840s China, Mary Clare Martin concluded that "girls might play military games and receive approval" (66). As early as 1791, prominent Norwich families hired Sergeant William Pell of the prestigious 1st Foot Guards Regiment to drill both their sons *and* daughters. This was sufficiently widespread by 1798 for the guards to set standard pricing for private instruction by non-commissioned officers. The practice was not exclusive to the guards, either; men in other regiments also hired themselves out as drill-sergeants (Steppler 102-103). Pell's manuscript autobiography recorded his extensive involvement "in drilling young Ladies & Gentleman" between the ages of five and thirteen in the manual exercise, as well as how "to walke and use dumb bells" (37-52, second series). Although these girls would never serve in the army, they received similar training.

Physical control and stately bearing were desirable in women as well as men. In instilling these traits, military drill served pupils of both sexes. The feminine application of martial training was clear to the parents who hired drill sergeants like Pell, but it was accepted elsewhere as well. Like the boys, the soldiers' daughters living in the Royal Military Asylum marched in step behind their band, led by girl "corporals" (Cockerill 67-68, 129-30; "Rules"). Instruction in military marching made girls more disciplined in their movements. "I hope you walk more gracefully than when we parted," Major Shelton told his daughter, "your gait was not unlike to that of an awkward Recruit, just joining his Regiment." He suggested that he might have to "send [her] to drill."<sup>31</sup> Martial training clearly enhanced feminine comportment in many parents' eyes.

There was a strong visual appeal to girls' performing drill. Georgina Lock and David Worrall have pointed to the account of an eleven-year-old girl wielding weapons, "Amazon like . . . as she Dances and Capers" in a London theatre in 1701 as a likely precursor to the 1750 stage act by real-life female marine Hannah Snell. Both, they argue were the "embodiment of masculine military skills . . ." (Lock and Worrall 18) and were part of a long line of actresses displaying their martial prowess (20).<sup>32</sup> A popular illustration that emerged from Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Camp* (first performed in the autumn of 1778) was of the actress training in drill to perform the role of the female soldier "Nancy." The print, called "Corporal Cartouch teaching Miss Camp-Love her Manual Exercise," shows a tiny maiden in a beribboned dress learning to shoulder her musket while a monkey replicates the movement and a smiling drummer boy looks on.<sup>33</sup> Like the actress, girls who learned drill could be seen as "playful," engaging in an appealing display of precision not dissimilar to dancing. The connections between dance and drill for this period have already been observed by Matthew McCormack. "For the men who served in the armies of the Enlightenment," McCormack argued, "there was no contradiction between being a good soldier and an elegant dancer" (317). The ability to execute synchronized movements in the ballroom was as important to soldiers' list of accomplishments as their performance on the parade square. Parents saw value in these skills for their daughters as well as their sons.

In light of such diversity of attitudes toward war play in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, girls' involvement becomes more plausible. In an atmosphere where some adults found boys' drill inappropriate, certain lads disrupted it, and some girls were encouraged

<sup>31</sup> Shelton, letter dated 29 Aug. 1812

<sup>32</sup> Snell's prowess, Lock and Worrall argue "would clearly have presented militia amateurs, serving professionals, and retired veterans alike with a challenge to their preconceptions about female martial ability as well as enlarging the scope of possible lifestyles for the women in the audience" (27).

<sup>33</sup> "The soubriquette [sic] 'Miss Camplove' was a pun on the

two plays 'The Camp' and 'Love in a Village,'" the latter having been Charlotte Walpole's London debut in 1777 (Clifford 3).

to learn it, war play could not be unequivocally masculine. If, however, war play was not entirely masculine, it was also not feminine. Instead, the plurality of attitudes helped to destabilize gender in many aspects of war play. It created spaces where girls could act on their own desires. They could take on soldier roles if they wished to, without incurring playmates' or parents' disapproval. These spaces were not universal, but they were more visible than they have been in existing scholarship.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This paper has emphasized the lack of rigid gender boundaries for juvenile war training and play in Georgian Britain. This is especially interesting given Dror Wahrman's observation that anxieties about gender in the aftermath of the American Revolutionary War left Britons increasingly skeptical of women's ability to assume male identities (*Making* 15-29; "Percy's"). As Marian Füssel has pointed out, the exceptionality and sensationalism of cross-dressed soldiers served to entrench the seemingly inherent masculinity of military service (536-37). This may have had the paradoxical effect of reducing concerns about girls playing at soldiers. In this sense, it is similar to Deborah Gorham's finding that Victorian parenting manuals placed few restrictions on little girls behaving like boys because they had no "fear that as big girls they would wish to continue to do so . . ." (80). It suggests that at least some parents had already embraced this thinking many decades earlier. If gender was seen as more fixed, then girls who took on warrior roles at playtime could pose little risk to the social order.

At the same time, however, the fact that these girls had any interest in doing so when their mothers were increasingly seen as "naturally" peace-loving and domestic provides more evidence of the absence of gender in war play than of its presence. The prolonged involvement of girls in war play, moreover, contrasted sharply with Wahrman's chronology for women warriors (*Making* 15-29; "Percy's"). Where the latter were celebrated for their masculine traits at mid-century only to become rounded and feminine in portrayals after the 1770s, descriptions of girls' war play retained similar features throughout the period. This can only be explained if the juvenile environment is uncoupled from the adult world and understood in its own right. "Gender role expectations are not simply inculcated into children by adults," sociologist William Corsaro observed, "they are socially constructed by children in their interactions with adults and each other" (112). This also leaves



room for children to ungender their play in the right circumstances. The pervasiveness of war in late Georgian England provided such an occasion.

In unearthing girls' involvement in warrior play, this article also destabilizes an assumption in modern studies that boys have always had exclusive access to and preference for this form of recreation. Despite repeated emphasis on the multiplicity of factors affecting children's activity, the consistent masculinization of war play cannot help but imply biological foundations. A 1990s investigation of war play in different cultures, for example, found a "striking sex difference in war play," which it attributed to "parental attitudes" and sex-role stereotypes but also to "possible hormonally mediated factors" (Costabile, Genta, Zucchini, Smith, and Harker 366). Without questioning the validity of recent findings on the physiology behind boys' greater likelihood to engage in aggressive play, this paper furthers the case that biology can never provide more than a partial understanding of war play.<sup>34</sup> In the twenty-first century, where gender is often seen as artificially constructed and women can serve openly as soldiers in most Western armies, the apparently inherent maleness of modern war play deserves scrutiny.

<sup>34</sup> For a summary, see Leonard Sax (50-59).

Historicizing war play is helpful because, in the age before mass media and the industrialization of toy-making, children's war play was markedly more spontaneous and less market-driven. James Marten has observed mock soldiering among the girls of the American Civil War, where children also experienced much lower levels of commercialization and mass socialization than today (160-62). This point is further borne out by an American historian's observation that few US children engaged in military make-believe in the comparatively peaceful decades preceding the First World War (Macleod 122). The British, by contrast, "deliberately immersed" their sons in militarism in the same period, through periodicals, books, and toys (Paris 11, 71-74, 136-38). Placed alongside the evidence for Georgian Britain, this shows that girls' proclivity to play at soldiers, though not as great as boys', was more visible in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century than it would be as the modern age progressed. This is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that British boys at that time were able to serve as actual soldiers, while girls were not. Both boys and girls could, however, watch troops drill, hear war stories, or even receive a modicum of formal military training. This encouraged girls to join their male counterparts in playing at soldiers.

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