MEN OF STEEL, MEN OF POWDER: *War, Guns, and Gender*

A student recently posed a question that I receive whenever I talk about war, gunpowder, and manhood. This aspiring military officer asked, "Have new technologies made war less masculine?"

Disposed to probing the questions students ask, I drew attention to his assumption that one kind of war is inherently masculine and another kind of warfare is inherently feminine. Yet, war is not a gendered concept outside of socio-cultural semantic fields. We gender different kinds of violence, among them war.

The platonic ideal of war, like the one fought by the gods above Troy, is gender-neutral. Athena battles with the same verve as Apollo. In the Trojan epics, however, the concept of the gender-neutrality of warfare weakens in the mortal world as Homer and Vergil maintain a pronounced gendered dichotomy in their depictions of war among homo sapiens. Below the gods, men fight, and women are raped. Men sacrifice, and women are sacrificed. War machines have evolved past the spears, swords, and chariots of the ancient world, but our depictions of war as a masculine activity have not despite the increasing—and long-present—participation of women in mortal combat.

The Trojan horse complicated the relationship between war and technology. Sly Odysseus's craft rendered years of brute force on the plains of Troy obsolete with a mechanical trick. The reactions of society to the number of technical changes in warfare since have alternated between the pride of innovation and the cries of exercration. The atomic bomb, an extraordinary scientific achievement, begets public alarm; napalm's fiery destruction, a chemical advance, stirs up street demonstrators; drone strikeson terrorists, an aviational feat, galvanize concern for their impersonal use against civilians. Often these cycles are characterized by gendered rhetoric as the introduction of non-brute-force technologies complicates the easy cultural assumptions we have about war and manhood based on physiology.

Gunpowder was no exception. Brought to Europe from Asia in the fourteenth century as a pre-developed technology, gunpowder weapons spread throughout Europe during the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. Bert Hall's comprehensive history of the early years black powder warfare, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe* (1997), outlines two conflicting historical interpretations of gunpowder. One theory, the military revolution thesis, claims that gunpowder radically changed the way war was fought between 1500 and 1700; the second history, a materialist counterargument, claims that the history of gunpowder dating back to the 1330s in Europe tells a story of gradual change, not revolution. Both arguments tend to ignore the vast archive of cultural reactions to gunpowder, such as those found in literature, print media, music, visual art, newspapers, and broadsheets. Yet, these sources shed light on the historical debate.

A survey of cultural reactions to gunpowder shows that in its earliest years (when gunpowder was tactically ineffective), people seemed to find firearms more mystifying than distressing. After 1500, when military tactics had grown to favor the use of gunpowder weapons, those authors writing about guns and war began to raise ethical, gendered, and even aesthetic concerns about its use. Thus, reactions were both gradual in their realization and revolutionary in their scope.

The earliest written German depictions of gunpowder warfare show up between 1400 and 1420. In particular, the anonymous *Feuerwerkbuch von 1420* (Firework Book of 1420), Heinrich Wittenwiler's *Der Ring* (The Ring, ca. 1409), and Konrad Kyeser's *Bellifortis* (Strong in War, ca. 1402), each present gunpowder as an emerging, numinous, and important but morally unremarkable tool of war. Notably, the *Feuerwerkbuch* establishes a number of standards for *Büchsenmeister* (artillery masters) that modern gender theorists would deem to be ideals of charismatic masculine domination. This how-to-guide for artillerists and commanders poses twelve questions that potential *Büchsenmeister* should be able to answer; it also establishes a set of moral and ethical personal attributes, which any viable *Büchsenmeister* candidate must possess. The questions test a mastery of the basic corpus of knowledge for the job; the attributes, on the other hand, create an idealized version of warrior masculinity. They demand that the *Büchsenmeister* be a man of integrity, God-fearing, brave, sober, and capable of reading and writing. A century later, authors would argue that these were the very traits being threatened by gunpowder technology.

Between the *Feuerwerkbuch von 1420* and the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), gunpowder became a fixture of the European battlefield. Military tactics and organization evolved to incorporate the newcomer. Shoulder arms were a significant contributor to the battlefield by 1525; artillery became a defined and autonomous military unit by the mid-sixteenth century; wheel lock pistols became a favorite cavalry weapon by the 1540s; knights disappeared entirely by the mid-seventeenth century.

Although early literary reactions to gunpowder arms were not significantly critical, the theological, literary, and even military reactions to gunpowder weapons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were often negative. Leonard Fronsperger (ca. 1520-1575), a renowned German military theorist, condemned the use of gunpowder weapons in his numerous treatises on how to make and use them. Many of his criticisms were explicitly gendered:

> What pestilence has ever before in a single moment taken away so many strong and virile men as when firearms made their way into the structure of battle? . . . In that moment, all bravery, strength, fortitude, virtue, and manliness cease to be.[1]

Elsewhere, he extends gunpowder's destruction of "manliness" to all of warfare: "Speaking properly, I must say that manliness and bravery are no longer commonly

practiced in the activities of war."[2] Fronsperger died when a cannon exploded while he was testing it.

Early modern European literary critiques of firearms echo Fronsperger's concerns. Ludovico Ariosto's poem *Orlando Furioso* (1532) casts Cymosco's cannon into the ocean after his horse is gunned down by the "cursed piece of enginery" and its wicked operator (*Orlando Furioso*, Canto IX.91). Cervantes's novel *Don Quixote* (1605) rails against the detestable age of "diabolical engines of artillery," which has brought an end to knight errantry (*Don Quixote*, Bk II: Ch 38). Quixote expostulates that gunpowder has made it possible for a "base" and "cowardly arm" to kill a "gallant gentleman." In Cervantes's prose, for better or for worse, gunpowder ends an aesthetic tradition (the knight errant), replacing it with errant knights. Neither last nor least, Germany's great baroque novelist Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (ca. 1621-1676), the creator of Brecht's "Mother Courage," condemned gunpowder as a destroyer of warrior masculine ideals as one of his anti-heroes—Springinsfeld (1671)—steals an injured Swedish officer's pistol during a battle and blows out his brains. Riding off with the pilfered pistol and the officer's liberated horse, Springinsfeld muses, "even the invincible, mighty Hercules, if he were alive today, could be laid low by the most humble stable boy just as easily as this brave officer" (*Springinsfeld*, Chapter XV). The gun is the great equalizer, diminishing the status of the cult of the warrior. Linking the Swedish officer to the archetype of warrior masculinity, Grimmelshausen assassinates both the officer and an ancient tradition of heroic warrior masculinity. In all three examples, the authors link gunpowder technology to warrior masculinity in an oppositional way. Either manly warriors prevail over the cursed arm (Ariosto) or are demolished by it (Cervantes and Grimmelshausen).

With so much of the masculine gendering of war tied up in language and aesthetic precedence, can warfare be drawn from its presumptive masculine sheath? Today, old assumptions about warrior masculinity, including the prerequisite "Y" chromosome, are giving ground in the face of new kinds

Close up of cannons in a "Wagenburg" (wagon fortress) from Leonhardt Fronsperger's *Kriegßbuch* (Frankfurt: Feyerabend, 1573). Engraving by Jost Amman.

Photograph by Patrick Brugh (2009). Newberry Library, Chicago: Special Collections, Case Folio U 0 .3144.

of military technology. The policies of the US military are far from being favorable toward women, but the upper echelons of the military discuss their soldiers in strategic rather than sexual terms. US Naval Command recently released a statement on their *21st Century Sailor and Marine* initiative addressing the growing problem of military sexual assault in terms of "Sailor and Marine personal readiness."[3] This categorization recalls Brownmiller's and Foucault's belief that rape as a crime of power rather than a crime of sex. (Incidentally, it was and is not uncommon for male soldiers in combat to be raped, the most famous case being T. E. Lawrence or Lawrence of Arabia during World War I.) It is a sign that the military is starting to think of women as an indivisible component of the military system rather than as a state-of-exception. W

omen are crucial to the medical, technical, combat, and logistical "readiness" of the military, which is constantly engaged in both combat and non-combat endeavors. The Department of the Navy's stance on sexual assault removes sex from the equation. Rape—by this pragmatic military logic—is tantamount to treason or sabotage rather than a breech of sexual propriety.

Clothed in steel, the men of sixteenth-century European battlefields believed the grand tradition of warrior masculinity to be blown away by firearms. But even the cultural unmanning of warfare in the age of gunpowder technology was eventually restored to masculine status through the rhetoric of nationalism and patriotism. Gunpowder technology was drawn into the nation-state's rhetorical constellation of warrior masculinity. As the technologies, rhetoric, and operations of today's military forces no longer assume a male operator, will our cultural perception of military violence as masculine change too? If it does, warrior ethos may default to the gender neutrality of the immortal warriors above Troy.

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Endnotes

1 Leonhart Fronsperger, Von Geschütz und Fewerwerck (Frankfurt: Feyerabend, 1564), unpag. Translation is my own.

2 Leonhart Fronsperger, Von Geschütz und Fewerwerck, IIa.

3 Department of the Navy, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Unit, "Senior Military Oversight Announced for Sexual Assault Cases in the Military," *Navy News Service* (Jul 7 2012). Story number: NNS120702-08. Accessed Jul 16 2012. http://www.navy.mil/