



Sisters in Arms: Female Warriors from Antiquity to the New Millennium

by Julie Wheelwright.

New York: Osprey, 2020. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-1-4728-3800-1.

Review by Kristen Williams, Clark University (kwilliams@clarku.edu).

In *Sisters in Arms*, Julie Wheelwright (City, Univ. of London) builds on her first book¹ to delve deeper into the subject of women, gender, and war:

I attempt to bring these women out from history's shadows to explain the circumstances in which they enlisted and their motives for leaving their homes, families and ordered lives, to chronicle their experience and understand how it transformed them before they were forced by circumstances, or chose, to end their military careers. (12)

Using gender rather than biological sex as the entry point for exploring women's participation in war, she identifies three categories of women: (a) "military companions or wives who were already present on a ship or on campaign when fighting erupted and they took action," (b) those who "disguised themselves as men to enlist, with or without a lover, husband or official complicity," and (c) "women ... granted exceptional permission to enlist as individuals either within all-male regiments or in all-female or even mixed-gender units" (13).

Chapter 1 "The Persistence of a Phenomenon," plots out the book's contents and explores the first of many included stories of women warriors. Wheelwright examines the case of Valerie Arkell-Smith, who passed as Capt. Victor Barker of the British Expeditionary Force in World War I. She was one in a long line of women who challenged gender norms and traditions through their participation in war, despite the daunting cultural and structural barriers they faced.

Chapter 2, "The Founding Myth of the Amazons," turns to the Greek myth of warrior women and the archeological evidence for their existence. Next comes a discussion of historical cases of women passing as men in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, and Russia through the nineteenth century and how their presence in militaries provoked debate about women's fitness for combat. The chapter ends with questions about the "female warriors' paradox: how did they transform and adapt to their male roles, how did they continue their disguise, what happened when they were discovered, how did their comrades respond, what became of them afterwards and how were they remembered?" (35). These questions form the topics of succeeding chapters, structured temporally in two ways. First, the chapters examine cases of women in specific wars: the American and French Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars, and the two World Wars. Second, discrete chapters follow the arc of a woman warrior, beginning with her enlistment (chap. 3), life in the military (chaps. 4-5), life after the military, including their demands for status as veterans, and the impact of their military experience in civilian life (chaps. 6-7).

Chapters 8-9 concentrate on women in the American, British, and Russian armed forces since 1900. Wheelwright discusses the concerns of women in the three respective state militaries regarding "how attitudes towards gender equality determine their assigned roles, their advances

1. *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness* (Boston: Pandora, 1989).

within the military hierarchy, how to deal with intimate relationships, parenting, fears about sexual assault from their comrades and the enemy, and public perceptions about combat” (212). Then as now, the pursuit of gender equality persists, as both men and women join the military in defense of their countries (212).

Citing archival materials, press accounts, and scholarly sources, the author gathers compelling historical and present-day evidence of women’s experiences of war, whether as military wives, women disguised as men, or actual enlistees. Wheelwright strives throughout to clarify how women’s participation in war reveals the tension between those who firmly adhere to traditional gender roles and norms (and concomitant notions of masculinity and femininity) and those who challenge and upend them. The author makes it clear that public opinion, the media, military organizations, and political elites matter for understanding that tension. Sometimes, for instance, public opinion supported women warriors, at other times strictly opposed them. Military organizations facing personnel needs and/or changes in warfare technology looked to women to fill their ranks. This included women passing as men, even some whose true identities as women were revealed while they were in the military. At the same time, women in the military experienced sexual harassment and rape, often by men in their own units who resented women’s presence in armed forces.

Wheelwright concludes her book with short section of “Final Thoughts.” Here she states that “The female warriors’ collective stories gathered together within this volume are *beginning to change* how we think about women’s historic participation in warfare, shattering its firmly held illusions of masculinity” [my emphasis] (249). While the author cites historians of women in militaries, there is an extensive literature in related fields like political science, psychology, and sociology, that bears on women, gender, and war. Many feminist scholars have enhanced our understanding of gender and warfare. To cite a few of these, Donna Pankhurst² has written extensively on “gendered backlash” in which women are expected to return to their traditional gender roles in the post-conflict period. Cynthia Enloe’s work on gender and militarism³ enhances our knowledge of the gender dynamics at play, while work by Dyan Mazurana⁴ concerns women in non-state armed groups.

Engaging more explicitly with this scholarship from other fields, in particular, feminist theoretical approaches to women, gender, and militaries as well as an intersectional analysis of gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc. would have strengthened the book’s argument. Thus, the book complements rather than engages with existing theoretical works.

Although the book’s subtitle is “Female Warriors from Antiquity to the New Millennium,” its chapters tend to concern women warriors from the eighteenth century onward. Its geographic purview is confined to Europe and North America—primarily the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia/Soviet Union. Forays beyond these geographic regions would have strengthened Wheelwright’s arguments and expanded her case studies beyond the mainly white, western women examined in her book.

These limitations aside, *Sisters in Arms* is a salutary addition to scholarship on women, gender, and war. Julie Wheelwright has enriched our knowledge of women warriors who exercised their agency in the face of daunting structural and cultural barriers. Scholars and non-specialists alike will find *Sisters in Arms* to be both an informative resource and a pleasure to read.

2. In *Gendered Peace: Women’s Struggles for Post-War Justice and Reconciliation* (NY: Routledge, 2008).

3. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2000).

4. “Women, Girls in Non-State Armed Opposition Groups,” in *Women in Wars: Contested Histories, Uncertain Futures*, ed. Carol Cohn (Malden, MA: Polity Pr, 2012) 146–68.