Cross-Dressed Performance at the Theatrical Margins: Hannah Snell, the Manual Exercise, and the New Wells Spa Theater, 1750

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ABSTRACT The essay recovers the performance politics of the ex-soldier and marine turned occasional actress, Hannah Snell (1723–1792). It identifies, for the first time, the exact playhouse in which she worked in the summer of 1750 (the “New Wells Spaw” theater, Clerkenwell, London) and discusses that area's theatrical environment. The essay also proposes new patronage contexts for her appearances there, centered around the ballad composer and herring fisheries advocate John Lockman (1698–1771). The essay demonstrates that Snell’s performance of the military “Manual Exercise,” or musket drill, developed from earlier practices of stage business in the London theaters. Snell’s act can also be linked to contemporary debates about militias, male martial effeminacy, and, more generally, ideologies of nation, gender, and empire. The essay particularly places her within an under-researched area of eighteenth-century cross-dressed performance history. KEYWORDS: The Female Soldier; eighteenth-century popular entertainment; Goodman’s Fields and Clerkenwell theaters; balladry; Charlotte Charke; Margaret “Peg” Woffington

THIS ESSAY AIMS TO RECOVER the political meanings of performances by Hannah Snell (1723–1792), who posed as a man to serve as a British soldier and marine, and later took the stage in uniform.¹ We identify the name and precise location of the theater in which Snell appeared after her discharge, which in turn allows us to explore the theatrical context and possible patronage for her act. We also explore precedents in the theater—of military activities, cross-dressing actresses, and combinations of the

two—uncovering a little-known tradition with implications for the history of performance in the eighteenth century.

Although Snell’s theatrical appearances were billed almost daily in the London newspapers during the summer of 1750, modern critical commentary has focused principally on her place within historiographies of gender construction, to the neglect of her work as an actress. Essays by Theresa Braunschneider and Caroline Breashears illustrate this trend, and are based almost exclusively upon her narrative of 1750, a work whose title also usefully encapsulates Snell’s life as The Female Soldier; or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell . . . Who Took Upon Herself the Name of James Gray; and, being Deserted by Her Husband, put on Mens Apparel, and . . . enlisted in Col. Guise’s Regiment of Foot, . . . Also a full and true account of her enlisting afterwards into Fraser’s Regiment of Marines. Braunschneider draws attention to contemporary homoerotic female lives, while Breashears places Snell among the diversity of female autobiographical narratives. Dror Wahrman’s much cited Past & Present essay on contemporary gender construction is typical in referring frequently to Snell’s Female Soldier, while mentioning her acting only fleetingly. Reluctance to engage with Snell’s theatrical career has led to some loss of critical momentum in the exploration of her life. Scarlet Bowen’s study of female soldier narratives usefully situates Snell’s story within a context of plebeian energy and irreverence—very much the type of context explored in this essay—yet Snell’s embodiment of masculine military skills on the London stage escapes comment. Even studies explicitly devoted to cross-dressing eighteenth-century actresses somehow mislay her.

Despite the paucity of comment on it, the content of her act can be pieced together from The Female Soldier. Its stage action consisted mainly of demonstrating the “Manual Exercise,” or musket drill, of preparing, aiming, and firing a bayonetted muzzle-loading rifle. With ballad-singing accompaniment, this formed the basis of

2. Announcements of Snell’s act start in the General Advertiser on June 29, 1750. She performed every night the theater was open until August 17, then she took a break until August 31; further performances are recorded in the same newspaper on September 17 and 19 and November 26, 1750. She did not take a benefit night. We have not been able to verify any other performances.

3. The Female Soldier was published in London, by R. Walker, in two editions in 1750, the first much shorter (ESTC T168465); we refer to the second edition (ESTC N006597 or T154454). Further references are to FS and are given parenthetically in the text.


her show. As her biography puts it, “she ... perform[ed] her Part as an able and experienced Actor. In this Branch of her Office she appears regularly dress’d in her Regiments, from Top to Toe, with all the Accoutrements, requisite for the due Performance of her Military Exercises.” Although Snell’s was mainly a solo act, The Female Soldier describes how “she and her Attendants fill up the Stage in a very agreeable Manner. The Tabor and Drum give Life to her March, and she traverses the Stage two or three Times over, Step by Step, in the same Manner as our Soldiers march on the Parade in St. James’s Park” (FS, 175).

The New Wells Spa in the London Theater Context

Although the nature of Snell’s performance is readily established, identifying the theater Snell worked in has led to scholarly confusion, because two playhouses operated under identical names in the Clerkenwell and Goodman’s Fields area at the same time.8 Definitive evidence is provided by an issue of the General Advertiser, which prints two playbills for the same night in the spring of 1750, both headed “New Wells.”9 One bill was for “the New Wells the Bottom of Lemon Street, Goodman’s Fields,” which showed “the Two celebrated Tartars” and The Scotch Vagaries. Or, Harlequin Barber and The Temple of Love. The other announced: “This Day. The New Wells, near the London Spaw, Clerkenwell, (which has been shut up these three Years, and is now Repair’d, Beautified, and render’d completely Theatrical, at a great Expence) will open with [a] Variety of new Performances.” This program featured The Sacrifice of Iphigenia paired with Harlequin Mountebank; or, The ’Squire Electrify’d. In other words, there were two theaters using the “New Wells” name in the Clerkenwell and Goodman’s Fields areas. In this essay, the “New Wells, near the London Spaw,” the Hannah Snell venue, will be called the New Wells Spa, in order to distinguish it from the other playhouse.

Hard evidence about the cluster of theaters around Clerkenwell and Goodman’s Fields has accurately been described as “scanty.”10 Even The Female Soldier says Snell’s theater was “the New Wells in Goodman’s Fields” (FS, 165), although the General Advertiser advertised the venue as “near the London Spaw, Clerkenwell,” a description that locates it some two miles northwest of Goodman’s Fields, probably on a site in present-day Rosoman Street. By century’s end, the site held a group of buildings by then known as “Rosoman’s-row,” after its developer, Thomas Rosomon (1718–1782), a dancer-turned- impresario who managed the New Wells Spa before co-managing the Sadler’s Wells playhouse in 1746.11 The New Wells Spa, built at what was to become No. 4 or

8. Errors or evasions are too numerous to cite but perhaps the most significant is the ODNB, which references an imprecise “Goodman’s Fields Theatre in London.” Snell’s most recent scholarly editor, Dianne Dugaw, refers to “Sadler’s Wells”; see The Female Soldier; Or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell [1750], ed. Dugaw, The Augustan Reprint Society 257 (Los Angeles, 1989), vi.

9. General Advertiser, April 17, 1750.


No. 5 Rosoman’s-row, had disappeared by 1813. Confusion as to its location probably arises from competitive local advertising practices aimed at drawing audiences away from the better-known Goodman’s Fields theaters and deliberately spoiling the market for the other New Wells playhouse. The original theater in Goodman’s Fields was one built in 1729 by Thomas Odell. His successor, Henry Giffard, built a bigger and better playhouse on a different site in the same vicinity in 1731, and it was this space that eventually became famous for hosting Garrick’s London debut in *Richard III* in 1741. Goodman’s Fields was attractive to theatrical entrepreneurs. It gave access to the key audience demographic of mercantile and legal professionals in the City, while its Middlesex location put it beyond the reach of the patent theaters’ Westminster boundary of privilege. Of course, Garrick’s brief sojourn there accelerated the area’s fame: one contemporary claimed that his appearance “by the Force of Attraction, drew even the Court, to the farthest Suburbs of London . . . making that remote Part of the Town as familiar to Courtiers and Quality as Wapping to Sailors.” Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to suppose Garrick’s reputation was the only pull.

The New Wells and New Wells Spa theaters were quite distinct from the Odell and Giffard theaters in Goodman’s Fields because they were based around a complex of eight medicinal springs in north Clerkenwell. The waters and sylvan locations made them attractive summer haunts. Although originally centered on St. Chad’s Well near the present-day King’s Cross railway station, the complex encompassed Pancras Wells (near the other principal railway station, on Euston Road), Bagnigge Wells, Powis Spring, and Islington Spa, later known as Sadler’s Wells. At least one of the spas used its waters to brew beer for sale to visitors, but the waters were also carefully marketed according to their alleged therapeutic properties, usually broadly differentiated as restorative or purgative. Although they operated only in the summer, these enterprises were commercially well developed and often provided live entertainment as part of their offer to customers. The Sadler’s Wells site (also known as New Tunbridge Wells, among other names) is perhaps the most famous component of this complex. Its stone-built theater was not constructed until 1765, but it seems always to have included some type of theatrical space. Historians usually comment on acrobats and slack- and tight-rope acts, but females wielding potentially dangerous weapons may also have been a recurrent feature of its repertoire. As early as 1701, the New Tunbridge Wells “musick-house” showcased an eleven-year-old girl performer “Arm’d Amazon like, with abundance of Rapiers, / Which she puts to her Throat, as she Dances and Capers.” Snell’s musket act may have been a development of this type of entertainment.

The New Wells and New Wells Spa theaters should be considered relative to the capital's other commercial entertainments. For example, both billed that they provided the plays *gratis*, with the purchase of “a Pint of Wine or Punch,” but the provision of beverages, including home-brewed beer, was already a normal business activity at these venues.\(^{16}\) It is within this specific local market context that the circumvention of the 1737 Theatre Licensing Act by Clerkenwell wells and spas should be situated. While the Odell and Giffard theaters brought the West End repertoire to Goodman’s Fields, these local playhouses exploited their distinctive conditions of operation and programming. The personnel involved were apparently habitues of the margins of the respectable theatrical world. The 1750 newspaper bills for Snell’s act show that the New Wells Spa was managed by “Mr. Yeates,” apparently in consort with his wife “Mrs. Yeates,” a singer, dancer, and actress, but possibly also through shared ownership with Thomas Rosomon. The Yeateses are almost certainly Richard Yeates (ca. 1706–1796) and Elizabeth Mary Yeates (d. 1753).\(^{17}\) In 1743, Mrs. Yeates performed in a semi-permanent “Great Theatrical Booth” on the Bowling-Green, Southwark, behind the Marshalsea prison, where she appeared in versions of Susan Centlivre’s *The Busy Body* (1709) and *Flora; or, Hob in the Well*, the latter probably an adaptation of Colley Cibber’s ballad farce *Hob; or the Country Wake* (1715).\(^{18}\) By June 1744 she was performing at the New Wells Spa in such works as *The Generous Sultan* and *The Contrivances of Harlequin*.\(^{19}\) Yeates himself was a dancer, sometimes performing at the New Wells Spa as part of “A grand dance of indians (after the Manner of their own Country).”\(^{20}\) It seems likely their careers were closely linked to those of Rosomon and his dancer wife, Mary (fl. 1743–82), who also worked in booths at London’s St. Bartholomew’s, May, and Southwark fairs in the 1740s, he sometimes playing Harlequin to her Columbine. In another indicator of this playhouse’s complex links to London’s larger theatrical scene, around 1746 Yeates engaged the destitute actress Charlotte Charke, then avoiding her creditors by traversing London in “Mens Cloaths” with her infant, to sing the role of Mercury (presumably cross-dressed) in his “Serious . . . Entertainment,” *Jupiter and Alemena*.\(^{21}\) Charke’s reputation was already established at both regular and irregular venues in the capital, often playing cross-dressed roles. Her occasional personal adoption of male attire signals not only the cultural heterogeneity of the New Wells Spa

\(^{16}\) *General Advertiser*, April 17, 1750.

\(^{17}\) Elizabeth Mary is not to be confused with the better known actress Mary Ann Yates (1728–1787), Richard Yates’s second wife; Highfill, Burnim, and Langhans, *Biographical Dictionary*, 16:312–22.

\(^{18}\) *Daily Advertiser*, February 25, 1743. According to Sybil Rosenfeld, the booth opened in 1732; see Rosenfeld, *The Theatre of the London Fairs in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1960), 92. For Elizabeth Mary Yeates as a singer, see *The Myrtle. Being a favourite collection of above two hundred of the newest and best English and Scotch songs . . . sung by Mr. Beard, Mr. Low, Miss Stephenson, Miss Burchel, and others, at the publick theatres and gardens* (London, 1755), 97.

\(^{19}\) *General Advertiser*, June 19, 1744.

\(^{20}\) *General Advertiser*, June 25, 1744.

performers—which clearly encompassed women who cross-dressed on stage and off—but also the realities of maintaining a professional foothold on the margins of London’s theatrical scene. It is within this context of fugitive actresses in fugitive theaters that Snell should be placed.

Cross-Dressed Martial Roles and the Manual Exercise

The only surviving visual representation of Snell’s New Wells Spa act is a print, an impression of which is tipped into the British Library copy of Charlotte Charke’s A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke, (youngest daughter of Colley Cibber, Esq;) (1755), captioned “Hannah Snell in Her Regimentals as She performs the Manual Exercise of a Soldier at Goodman’s Fields Wells [sic] 1750” (figure 1). This shows her demonstrating the exercise’s procedures (“Join yr right Hand to yr Firelock,” etc.) and discharging her musket on stage (“Present and Fire”). Snell’s performance of the manual exercise in her identity as an ex-soldier was her act’s most singular feature. It sharply differentiates her from the better-known actress Margaret “Peg” Woffington, who made two appearances mocked up as a militiaman at Drury Lane in March 1746. She spoke an epilogue in the character of “The Female Volunteer,” cross-dressed and (as shown in a contemporary print) wearing a sheathed sword in “an Attempt to make our Men stand.”22 Her two appearances in this guise at the end of performances of Francis Beaumont’s The Scornful Lady (1630) and John Dryden’s All for Love (1677), although they occurred at a significant moment after the Jacobite uprising, cannot have matched the audience numbers drawn by Snell’s thirty-plus nights at the New Wells Spa. Woffington went on to develop the Female Volunteer into Britannia for another Drury Lane epilogue of October 1746, speaking the lines, “Unite my fav’rite Sons, inspired by me / And draw the sword for George and Liberty!”23 Although it should be remembered that Woffington was always an actress in a role, whereas Snell had recently been a professional soldier, both performers developed their stage business from existing conventions within London’s theatrical repertoires.

Explicitly martial stage business had increasingly developed from the beginning of the century, not least demonstrating audience interest in military matters. For example, John Breval’s Play Is the Plot (1718) included one character drilling another in the manual exercise (and revealing his own ignorance of the sequence):

.mac[hone]. . . . make your Exercise, come———join your Left Hand to your Piece.
pet[er pyrate]. How? When it is upon the Left Shoulder . . .
mac. . . . do as I bid you, Sir———Fire.
pet. What, before I am presented? . . .
(Lays the Piece down.)24

22. The Female Volunteer; or, an Attempt to make our Men stand (London, 1746), broadside; General Advertiser, March 17 and 18, 1746.
24. John Breval, Play is the Plot. A comedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane, by His Majesty’s Servants (London, 1718), 23–24.
Similarly, the actor Henry Woodward’s *The Beggar’s Pantomime; or, the Contending Colombines* (a skit on the 1736 Drury Lane quarrel between Susannah Maria Cibber and Kitty Clive over the role of Polly in *The Beggar’s Opera*) had an opening scene with “a Serjeant and Twelve Grenadiers—they Exercise, after which the Tower Guns are fired.” This production at the Theatre Royal, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, reminds us of the east London location of some of the capital’s major theaters in the first half of the century. As it happens, Richard Yates, later owner of the New Wells Spa theater, appeared in Woodward’s pantomime as ’Squire Rustick. *The Beggar’s Pantomime* started its seasonal run at the beginning of December 1736, and by the end of the month, the production had acquired Charlotte Charke, cross-dressed, in the character of Pistol. The appearance of these actors, later associated with productions at the New Wells Spa, at this more fashionable theatrical address is typical of the movement of personnel among London theaters of all sorts. This labor mobility was a major feature of their distinct markets, which could serve as reservoirs of theatrical talent.

Cross-dressed and other unorthodox gender roles had long been popular with all types of theater performers and audiences. The popularity with audiences of cross-dressed female actors pretending to be soldiers can be traced back at least as early as Thomas Shadwell’s *The Woman-Captain* (1680), but two divergent and distinctive types of stage business developed out of such dramas. One strand, undoubtedly dominant in terms of the sheer number of performances, derived from the role of Silvia in George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* (1706). This immediately popular play was eventually chosen to open the Lincoln’s Inn Fields and Goodman’s Fields theaters in 1714 and 1729, and it also successfully ran in colonial America from 1732, with no fewer than twenty-eight performances there before 1774. However, *The Recruiting Officer* normally does not require Silvia to wield weapons as a principal piece of stage business.

In several early-century examples of the other strand, however, the basics of Snell’s manual exercise act, except for the discharge of the gun, featured explicitly. Breval’s *Play is the Plot* is one example, and Shadwell’s *The Woman-Captain* also featured a cross-dressed woman drilling soldiers in the manual exercise. In 1744 *The Woman-Captain* was adapted for the Haymarket by the ex–Goodman’s Field theater owner Thomas Odell as *The Prodigal: or, Recruits for the Queen of Hungary*. Shadwell’s Mrs. Gripe became Odell’s Mrs. Scrape, but both versions had them dressed “like a young Officer,” drilling and striking clumsy soldiers attempting to perform the manual exercise: “Order your Arms. (they poise their Muskets.) Did you ever see such Rascals?

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25. Henry Woodward, *The Beggar’s Pantomime; or, The Contending Colombines: A New Comic Intermix’d with ballad songs in the Characters of Polly and Lucy, Manager, and Deputy Manager. With the Scenes of Britannia; or The Royal Lovers. As they are perform’d at the Theatre-Royal in Lincolns-Inn-Fields*, 2nd ed. (London, 1736), 9.
Order your Arms thus—set ‘em down; take that, to make you remember another time (She canes ’em.)”28 However, the most likely genesis of Snell’s act probably was the epi-
logue to Charles Shadwell’s Drury Lane comedy The Humours of the Army (1713), in
which the cross-dressed “Female Officer,” Belvedera, delivers her lines while perform-
ing elements of the manual exercise with her “Fuzee,” or light musket (such as that car-
ried by a fusilier):

No Warlike Weapons are to me unknown,
To Prime—to Charge—and Cock let me alone,
I’le Exercise with any one in Town,

Here she does the Mo-
tions with Fuzee.29

Belvedera’s manual exercise “Motions”—played by Susannah Mountfort, who special-
ized in breeches roles—was a brief dramatic interpolation, a display that later became
more fully developed by other performers.

Even taken on their own, these repeated theatrical appearances of women firing
guns and women striking men could tell us something about gender conventions in
the period. But because they were presented at particular places and times, and before
specific audiences, they actually changed those conventions. Although The Prodigal
never achieved the popularity of The Woman-Captain, Charlotte Charke’s cross-
dressed appearance as the Fool in Odell’s version of the Shadwell play added to the
number of women actors playing male military roles. It is possible that a later Hay-
market pantomime, La Fille Capitaine, & Arlequin Sergeant, ou la Fille Savante: or,
The Woman Captain and Harlequin Serjeant, or The Philosophical Lady (1735), also
incorporated Shadwell’s stage action.30 With theaters occasionally puffing produc-
tions of The Woman Captain; or, The Usurer turn’d Soldier (performed “At the Desire of
several Ladies of Quality”), there can be little doubt of the broad familiarity of such fig-
ures as Mrs. Gripe, Mrs. Scrape, and other female military characters who interacted
with armed male characters.31

In other words, Hannah Snell’s act emerged from a variety of dramatic traditions
but with no single identifiable progenitor. Its most immediate theatrical ancestor,
Woffington’s militiaman, itself drew on pre-existing cross-dressed female military
roles. These multiple strands, which clearly also encompassed The Recruiting Officer
and Play is the Plot, included Miss Dennis Chock (or “Dennychock”), aged about eight,
who appeared at Dorset Gardens theater in 1697 “with Sword in Hand,” “Dress’d with a
great Wig like a Beau,” to speak the epilogue to Elkanah Settle’s The World in the Moon.
Crucially, this cross-dressed child represented an effeminate male adult nervous about
fighting: “you may believe I fear / To see this naked Weapon. But I swear / I’d fight our

28. Thomas Odell, The Prodigal: or, Recruits for the Queen of Hungary. A comedy. As it is acted at
30. Daily Advertiser, April 25, 1735.
Foes, did I not too well know / ’Twould spoil my Character of being a Beau.”

From the late seventeenth century onward, London audiences had many opportunities to see shows openly doubting the quality of British martial masculinity. The feminization of the military, as the modern historian Kathleen Wilson has shown, was a persistent anxiety in eighteenth-century Britain. The opening sentence of *The Female Soldier* was itself typical in commenting on “this dastardly Age of the World, when Effeminacy and Debauchery have taken Place of the Love of Glory,” but it was contemporary theaters’ ability to present a soldier as a girl that popularized these ideas (FS, 9–10).

Snell, Woffington, and Miss Dennychock represented the reiteration of the female soldier role in theaters ranging from the vulgar to the refined. New gender configurations no sooner appeared in print than they were represented in playhouses. The connections between commentary on male effeminacy and the vigorous state of London theater are exemplified in the figure of John Brown, whose *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* forms one of the most extensive contemporary dissertations on masculine decline. His commentary on masculinity continued on the stage. In Brown’s successful Drury Lane tragedy, *Barbarossa*, promoted and acted in by Garrick, its eponymous tyrant is vanquished with a sword. Yet the denouement suggests that such red-blooded masculinity is no longer in existence; Garrick’s opportunistic epilogue for the actor Henry Woodward “in the Character of a fine Gentleman” mocks his refined habits. Such contrasts of heroic martial masculinity and civilian male effeminacy appeared repeatedly on the London stage.

The scale and organizational complexity of London’s theaters means that we can use evidence of their productions and audiences to explain particular dramatic themes. Regularly performed cross-dressed soldier roles, such as Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer*, clearly co-existed alongside more irregular performance types exemplified in the New Tunbridge Wells dancer, Miss Dennychock, or Peg Woffington’s militiaman. Together they reached audiences amounting to tens of thousands of people and were clearly capable of social influence. Snell’s show at the New Wells Spa was a significant material space for the emergence of new perspectives on male effeminacy and the cultural potential for switching conventional gender roles.

The transgression of traditional sexual roles between military males and military females, quite apart from their embodied representation by cross-dressed actresses, can readily be seen in the print showing “Hannah Snell . . . as She performs the

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35. See, for example, his claim that “as our Manners are degenerated into those of Women, so are our Weapons of Offence”; Brown, *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London, 1757), 125.

36. “Behold a Gentleman! . . . / Laugh if you please—I’ll take a Pinch of Snuff!”; Brown, *Barbarossa. A tragedy. As it is performed at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane* (London, 1755), [6].
Manual Exercise of a Soldier” (see figure 1). Its images are remarkably similar to those that appeared in contemporary militia training manuals. From the beginning of the century, but with a quickening pace around the Seven Years’ War, there was a noticeable market for specialized books aimed at militia volunteers and intending commissioned officers. These manuals, typified by *The Militia-Man. Containing, Necessary Rules for both Officer and Soldier. With an explanation of the manual exercise of the foot. Illustrated with forty-eight cuts* (ca. 1740), were often illustrated with woodcuts or copper etchings particularly focused on explaining the difficult sequences of the manual exercise (see figure 2, from a similar work). The market for such books suggests a likely reception context for Snell’s act. With up to seventy-four individual movements in the manual exercise, sometimes with several “Motions” within each (including loading and firing the gun as well as fixing and unfixing the bayonet), the manuals suggest the complexity, dexterity, and sheer physicality of Snell’s New Wells Spa performances. The British Library print appears to show her firing the smooth-bore flintlock British marine or militia pattern musket of around 1750, which had a barrel length of about forty-six inches and weighed about twelve pounds. The fixed bayonet shown in the print would have added a further seventeen inches to its length. Since the manual exercise was performed to a set of shouted commands, it is possible Snell demonstrated the movements of the exercise while calling out the orders for each action, perhaps in a straight tone, perhaps in a parodic one. A weapon such as the musket would normally have been identified as a male military accoutrement, but on stage, wielded by a woman, it became a transgressive statement, authenticating and emphasizing Snell’s status within her previous profession. As for the act’s dramatic effect, the audience might have looked forward to the gun’s discharge but feared its noise and smoke, particularly on account of preconceptions about the dangers of firing weapons within confined spaces. Snell’s musket may also have had an extra-theatrical usage, furnishing an additional advertisement for her act if she carried it with her in the vicinity of the theater. It 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.

37. The Duke of Marlborough’s New Exercise of Firelocks and Bayonets; appointed by His Grace to be used by all the British forces, and the militia. With instructions to preform [sic] every motion by body foot and hand (London, ca. 1708); William Breton, *Militia Discipline: The Words of Command, and Directions for Exercising the Musket, Bayonet, and Cartridge [sic]... second edition* (London, 1717); Benjamin Cole, *The Soldier’s Pocket-Companion; or, The Manual Exercise of our British Foot* (London, 1746); *The Soldiers Pocket Companion; or, The Manual Exercise of a Foot Soldier Taken from the Life for the Use of the Gentlemen of the Several Associations* (London, 1746).


39. For a later variation, see Montague Philip Corri’s *A Melody on the Words of Command of the Manual Exercise of the British Army, Sung by Mr. Woodham of the Westminster Loyal Volunteers Composed & Respectfully Dedicated to the Patriotic Ladies of Great Britain, by M. Corri, of the same Corps* (London, [1803]).
The Militia Debate

Snell’s show coincided with increased calls for the establishment of local militias, making the militia debate an important context for understanding its significance. Moves to establish civilian militias increased after the invasion and rebellion scare years of 1744–45, eventually to be consolidated in the Militia Act of 1757, after a widespread public debate. Militias were dependent upon local activism and voluntary micro-financing. Inevitably, those most visible in the community were expected to play their part. The early participation of London playhouses is witnessed by Lincoln’s Inn theater’s contribution of 16 shillings toward “¼ pt. of a Horse in the Militia for the Year 1724 due Lady day last.” The practical and constitutional implications of establishing militias were profound. These included such political conundrums as how to establish the monarch’s control over an armed populace of landless men as well as enduring problems of rank and authority in a volunteer service not subject to military discipline. Weighty interventions in the form of Adam Ferguson’s *Reflections Previous to the Establishment of a Militia* (1756) and Judge Blackstone’s advocacy, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), all testify to Enlightenment Britain’s continuing public debate around this issue, reflecting as it did fears about internal rebellion and external invasion. Among the array of thorny political issues posed was the paradox of loyalist Scottish Highland militias armed with the iconic broadswords deployed by the Jacobite rebels crushed at Culloden. Significantly, within ten days of her first appearance, Snell appended a section called “The Battle of Culloden” (possibly a ballad, possibly a dramatic routine) to conclude her show. In other words, Snell’s musket-firing drill and the political implications of its performance had immediate resonance in a nation urgently considering its defensive organization.

Just as her act evoked the context of homeland defense, Snell’s voyage to the East Indies in November 1747, aboard the sloop *Swallow* in Rear Admiral Edward Boscawen’s fleet, associated her career with Britain’s attempts to expand its trading empire. Her New Wells Spa act was, after all, a fusion of the skills she had learned as a female soldier of empire. Snell was involved at first hand in the British expansion in India, and *The Female Soldier* narrates Boscawen’s failed siege of Pondicherry, in which the British trenches filled with monsoon rains; Snell, “notwithstanding she stood so deep in Water . . . fired no less than thirty-seven Rounds of Shot” during an attack on the...

41. BL, Egerton MS 2265, April 13, 1725.
42. The Disbanded Volunteers Appeal to Their Fellow-Citizens: Being an Impartial Account of the Proceedings at Exeter against a Set of Gentlemen, Who Had Formed Themselves into a Volunteer-Company for His Majesty’s Service (Exeter, 1746).
FIGURE 2. Opening of chapter 1, *The Complete Militia-Man, Or a compendium of military knowledge... By an officer of the British forces* (London, 1760). Huntington Library, RB 29.4101, sig. B.
Franco-Indian fortifications in early October 1748 (FS, 44–58 at 58). The New Wells Spa had long been involved with representations of empire. As early as 1740, it presented “The Siege of Porto-bello, with the Demolition of the Forts and Castles,” an afterpiece portraying Vice Admiral Edward Vernon’s attack on a Spanish-owned garrison that controlled trade in the Panama region.46 These representations included appearances of women in allegorized roles, perhaps best illustrated at the New Wells Spa by its post-Jacobite rebellion show, Britannia Rediviva: or, Courage and Liberty. An Allegorical masque (1746), which portrayed Liberty and the Genius of England defeating “Rebellion,” with “A Grand Martial Dance.” The final scene depicted “The Genius of England seated on a Throne, with Attendants. Courage presents Rebellion, &c. to her in Chains.”47 In this drama, the masque’s Protestant constitutionalism was feminized, with Liberty and the Genius of England played by “Miss Vaux” and “Miss Lincoln” (“Miss” being the contemporary playbill designation for young women). Snell’s performances took place among changing gendered representations of Britain on stage, not least exemplified by the consolidation of warrior females into the figure of Britannia.

Solo Performance and Plagiarism

Snell’s London reception was the outcome of this series of highly specific intersections of politics, empire, and cultural production. The marketing of her story gives us a sense of anticipated audience reaction. Robert Walker marketed The Female Soldier through notices in the General Advertiser beginning June 29, 1750, just two days after the same newspaper published the bill for her first night at the New Wells Spa; twelve days later the same publication announced (for “the Curious”) “A Print of an exact Likeness of the so-much-talk’d-of British Amazon, Hannah Snell”—warning prospective purchasers against “Imposition from several Puffing Pretenders.”48 Like her oath sworn before the Lord Mayor, The Female Soldier never existed as Snell’s only public persona. Her recourse to a solo show links her to a form traceable at least as far back as the performances of Mary Frith (alias “Moll Cutpurse” [ca. 1584–89–1659]), who cross-dressed and carried a sword at the Fortune Theatre in 1611. The solo performance is a persistent form that appeals to a very specific market, but one surprisingly under-researched within performance studies.49 Snell was precariously placed at one of

47. Britannia Rediviva: or, Courage and Liberty. An allegorical masque. As it is perform’d at the New Wells, Clerkenwell. The musick compos’d by Mr. John Dunn (London, 1746), 8–9.
London’s most marginal theaters and struggling, like many returning soldiers, to find a viable civilian career. In much the same way as modern performers, eighteenth-century actors may have elected to perform solo in order to access audiences and income when not otherwise employed as part of a company. By exercising their professional skills, solo performers increase the chances of regular employment because managers or producers have opportunities to see them work. A solo show may also have offered greater levels of independence, financial economies, and time flexibility, particularly around arranging rehearsal times and costuming. The interconnectedness of London’s theatrical marketplaces made these realistic strategies. The success of a solo show also depended heavily on its principal and was therefore not easy to replicate. In the absence of dramatic copyright, London’s newer theatrical spaces were readily plagiarized by the patentees. In 1756 Drury Lane staged “a Pant[omime]: call’d Harleq: Mountebank,” which the prompter diligently entered into the account book as “(stole from ye. Wells) . . . went off well [£]140.”50 This was a show that, with the subtitle “The ’Squire Electrify’d,” had enjoyed long runs at the New Wells Spa since 1750. In other words, the London theaters’ niche audiences meant that a long-running play could profitably be remarketed across town. Drury Lane’s brazen purloining of the New Wells Spa Harlequin Mountebank demonstrates the unique value of Snell’s show, which, with its display of advanced musketry skills, was difficult to counterfeit. It was clearly necessary for the New Wells Spa to retain and exploit her individual offering to the public.

Snell’s owning and wearing of “Regimentals” during her show was similarly vital. Not only did they provide an authentic performance costume, but they also helped substantiate her claims to an army pension. The Female Soldier describes her stopping the Duke of Cumberland’s carriage in St. James’s Park to submit a petition for a pension, on which occasion she appeared in “the same Dress and Form as the Picture which was delivered with the First Number of this Work” (FS, 162; see figure 3). Authentication of Snell’s likeness among the various competing prints circulating in July 1750 relied on establishing the accuracy of her uniformed appearance. One of the prints published that month carefully discriminated among the representations, noting that she was delineated “Not in a Sailor’s Habit, but in the Real Regimentals of a Marine, as she deliver’d (for so she must deliver it, if, it ’tis said, she was in her Regimentals) her Petition to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland; and emblematically embellished with Shipping, Forts, &c. representing War.”51 Snell’s performance in military “Regimentals” was not merely an option of gender construction, or even entirely a piece of theatrical costuming; it was also a material factor of her economic survival. Within the battle-of-the-likenesses that The Female Soldier’s publication initiated, a suspiciously embellished uniform might not merely indicate the presence of print piracy (this print was advertised to be sold “this Evening near the Wells, Goodman’s

51. General Advertiser, July 17, 1750.
Fields” but might also threaten her personal economic viability by spoiling the market for the live show.

**Balladry and Patronage**

Snell also incorporated ballad singing into her act, invoking a further, extensive range of cultural intersections. The *General Advertiser* announced that on Snell’s first night, “The Ballads will be sold at the Bar of the Wells.”

The eighteenth-century female ballad singer was a figure awkwardly placed on London’s cultural margins, drawing attention to herself by virtue of her poverty as well as her urban visibility. The facts that admission to the theater was controlled by the purchase of “Wine or Punch” and Snell’s ballads were available “at the Bar” remind us that these fugitive playhouses were raucous environments where street and theater cultures merged. Arguably, Snell might have been reduced to singing her ballads on the street if she had not received an army pension. Indeed, Snell’s legacy is permeated by markers of the restrictive 1737 act, which not only precluded her from speaking on the New Wells Spa stage but also forced her, as the performer of a non-canonical, generically hybrid theatrical form, to the margins of literary history. This has significant implications for understanding the performance legacy she was able to bestow. There were no newspaper reviews of her act, and its sole witness is the account published by Robert Walker. *The Female Soldier* tells us that the “Art and the Airs of a Player are less conspicuous in her. . . But then Nature steps in and amply supplies that Deficiency.” Walker also says she was able “to add new Graces to the several [musical] Catches which she exhibits” (*FS*, 174).

The intersections between balladry and Snell’s act are complex. As Walker and Richard Yates, the New Wells Spa manager, must have realized, Snell might have been regarded as a kind of poor man’s Peg Woffington, but she also fit readily into the context of the ballads about warrior women discussed by Dianne Dugaw. Indeed, Walker appears to have employed similar motifs to those outlined in Dugaw’s schematic diagrams of ballad structure: a woman is left by her soldier lover, pursues him in disguise, remains undiscovered until she or he is wounded, and discovers or declares herself as she nurses him. In *The Female Soldier*, the male figure was probably also adapted for a newly emerging middle-class audience of novel readers into a more realistic wandering husband, a Dutch man who thieves and whores and is eventually executed. In Snell’s account, the classic love story breaks down and is replaced by tropes repeated in other biographies of female soldiers—such as evading the love of a woman and being wounded in the thigh. Situated somewhere between Woffington’s Britannia and the

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52. Ibid.
56. See, for example, *The Life and Adventures of Mrs. Christian Davies* (London, 1740); *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Blue-Eyed Patty, the Valiant Female Soldier* (Wolverhampton, U.K., 1800).
females of warrior women ballads, who are redeemed when they become nurses, Snell's cross-dressed soldier marks a significant divergence from the norms that preceded and followed her.

Perhaps even more unexpected is a circumstantial trail of evidence suggesting that parts of Snell's act, specifically her balladry, had links to literary patronage. Although the manual exercise remained a fixture, Snell developed her act in several ways. For example, she early on added "The Battle of Culloden."57 However, of the two ballads reprinted in *The Female Soldier*, it is the unlikely sounding "Britannia's Gold Mine; or, the Herring Fishery for Ever" that provides the most significant clue to Snell's surprising role in amplifying the ideology of mercantile nationalism in the Clerkenwell area of London (*FS*, 174, 182–85). The ballad had originally been performed at the Society of Anti-Gallicans and published separately by its composer, John Lockman (1698–1771).58 Lockman was the secretary of the Free British Fishery Society. This was a group, like the Anti-Gallicans, who foreswore claret and French lace, and were emblematic of concerns about Britain's economic and constitutional stamina and precarious military position.59 Indeed, Snell's act connects a seamless (if dizzying) network of patronage connecting balladeering, theatricality, and the national politics of herring fishing, at its hub the figure of Admiral Vernon (the victor of Porto-Bello and founder of the Free British Fishery Society) and John Lockman, who served as a proficient dramatist, balladeer, and energetic advocate for the fishery scheme.60 Intriguingly, Lockman's pamphlet on *The Vast Importance of the Herring Fishery* (1750) addressed itself to "the National Wealth, our Naval Strength, and the Highlanders," the Scottish dimension of which is a reminder of contemporary proposals to promote economic prosperity to deter Jacobitism. Presumably, Snell's "Battle of Culloden" celebrated Cumberland's crushing victory of 1746. If it was a ballad, it is possible it was also composed by Lockman, since he was already the author of *Verses to His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland: On his being wounded, at the repulse of the French, near Dettingen* (1743). With Lockman employed by the Free British Fishery Society (possibly enabled by Vernon's advocacy) and Snell singing an adulatory ballad in its support, Snell's act appears to be situated within a remarkable network of patronage centered on this obscure Clerkenwell theater. Their interaction, with Snell and Lockman in different organizations but visibly networked, is another aspect of the configuration of the complexity of London's theatrical assemblage.

58. John Lockman, *Britannia's Gold-mine; or, the Herring-Fishery for Ever. A new ballad, to the tune of, There was a jovial beggar, &c. sung at Draper's-Hall, by the Anti-Gallicans; and at Merchant-Taylor's Hall, by the Sons of the Clergy . . . Now first published from the genuine copy* (London, 1750).
59. *T—t—m and V—d-t. A Collection of the Advertisements and hand-bills, serious, satyrical, and humorous, published on both sides during the election for the City and Liberty of Westminster, begun November 22d, 1749. Printed in the same manner and character, as the originals* (London, 1749), 39.
60. Edward Vernon, *Considerations Upon the White Herring and Cod Fisheries: in which the Design of Carrying On and Improving them, in the manner proposed by a Society trading with a Joint Stock, is fully explained, and freed from all objections* (London, 1749).
These networks could probably be analyzed further, but there is good reason to situate this cross-dressed female ex-soldier actress within this unexpected structure of patronage linking patriotism, commerce, and Protestant ascendency to the acts at the New Wells Spa. Lockman no doubt realized Snell’s manual exercise drew on the popularity of plays as diverse as Shadwell’s *The Woman-Captain* and Breval’s *Play is the Plot* and that this theater presented useful opportunities for furthering his political and professional interests. He may also have been aware that the role of harlequin in Drury Lane’s politically risqué 1746 *Harlequin Incendiary: or, Colombine Cameron*, a provocative reprise of the rebellion, had been played by New Wells Spa theater owner Richard Yates (with Columbine Cameron performed by Kitty Clive), and that, in consequence, a Culloden ballad or acting routine would be manageable in Clerkenwell. Lockman’s links to the Duke of Cumberland and Highlands economic advocacy suggest that both the immediate post-rebellion political climate and Snell’s choice of material for her act were connected. Supposing Snell’s “Battle of Culloden” was more than a ballad, the stage business narrated in *The Female Soldier* is highly suggestive of how it might have been performed. The narrator describes how “she and her Attendants fill up the Stage... The Tabor and Drum give Life to her March, and she traverses the Stage two or three Times over, Step by Step, in the same Manner as our Soldiers” (*FS*, 175). If this was some kind of re-enactment of Culloden, then the role of Snell’s “Attendants” invites speculation as to its dramaturgy. Again, details of the stage act are tantalizingly elusive. Were they women or men? If women, were they cross-dressed and did they capitalize on their femininity as they marched? Conceivably, Snell might have drilled them herself, allowing them to copy her movements, competently or incompetently, by way of contrast with her own expertise.

Although the exact details of Snell’s dramaturgy are beyond recovery, the specific theatrical context of her act can be connected to a number of contemporary debates concerning civilian militias, the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion, and the commercial imperatives of Britain’s herring fishing. Certainly, it was her brief theatrical career, rather than her *Female Soldier* narrative, that became embedded in popular memory. In 1779 a newspaper reported that a female corpse in military uniform had been found on Moushold Heath, near Norwich, and was (erroneously) believed to be that of “Hannah Snell, who served as a marine.” The item specifically recollected her “performing the manual exercise at Sadler’s Wells” (typically mistaking the precise venue). 61 Twenty years later, with *The Female Soldier* subtly transmuted into the 1801 *Female Warrior*, its anonymous editor updated Snell’s venue to “the Royalty Theatre” and added elaborations detailing how her act (described as “The Manual and Platoon Exercises”) was performed, with “intricate wheeling, marching and counter-marching... at the head of about twenty men, with whom she forms close and open column, and divides them

into divisions, sections, &c. with great military precision.” With so much misinformation prevalent about Snell, and with so much modern concentration dedicated to describing her place in the history of gender construction at the expense of her acting, it is time her extraordinary theatrical career at the New Wells Spa was reconsidered.

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62. The editor’s comment that “The audience were electrified at first sight” dates this linguistically to 1801, OED’s first figurative usage of “electrified,” The Female Warrior, Or, Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell (London, 1801), 69–70.