

Eighteenth-century Theatrical War Plays and the Experience of War

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War is inextricably bound up with the play-element in culture—as Johan Huizinga explains in his *Homo ludens* (1938)—while the concept of theatre is also deeply rooted in Western thinking about both the representation of war and military strategy. ‘Playing war’ on the one hand and singing and writing about war’s heroic theatre (on the other) can involve very different approaches to battlefield experiences, however. In his chapter about *spel en krijg* (play and war), Huizinga characterizes the distanced and elevated perception of war in epic, songs, and chronicles as a *litteraire visie* (literary vision) of war and distinguishes this from “agonal” forms of war experience related to the competitive aspects of performing a battle. Medieval battles, for instance, were often preceded by a stage-managed man-to-man fight, based on the principles of chivalric rituals. “War plays” were thus directly bound to war reality itself. In literary texts, however, Huizinga sees the reality of war being overshadowed by glorifying descriptions of heroic behavior.

In the course of the eighteenth century, the dichotomy between elevated war heroic in literature on the one hand and war culture directly linked to experiences on the battlefield on the other was losing meaning. Since professionalized armies had replaced the old militias on the battlefields, the growing distance between the culture of war and the reality of war experienced by individuals created a growing civic fascination for military culture. Authors knew very well how to make use of this fascination.¹ Three main battles of the War of the Spanish Succession, for instance, were re-enacted in the Amsterdam city theatre (1704-1709) as multimedia events with songs, dances, and acrobatic performances in order to bring alive military performances on the field.² This detached form of public interest in military spectacle remained alive during peace times. The public splendor of the big maneuver in the Saxon village Zeithain for instance, organized by August the Strong in 1730, inspired many authors to write literary glorifications of the strength of the different professional battalions participating. Like the Amsterdam war plays, these re-enactments in the field were mainly focused on the theatrical aspects of military acting and the splendor of the participants’ attributes and costumes.³

Public military events, like the above-mentioned maneuvers, had a theatrical character and a strong relationship with eighteenth-century leisure and consumption culture. On the one hand, these events highlighted the outward world of the military, but on the other they manifested a public desire to know more about military culture and about the experience of war in particular. As did masquerade-culture, the war re-enactments envisioned the adaption of soldierly identity as a choice out of a set of different professional and social modes of identification, a world where “self” was externally constituted and socially turned rather than inward looking.⁴ The fascination for military re-enactments and masquerades depended on the

¹ About English war poetry during the War of the Spanish Succession: John Richardson, ‘Modern Warfare in Early-Eighteenth-Century Poetry’, in: *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 45 (2005) 3, p. 557-577.

² Door Yver Bloeid de Kunst [motto of the author Enoch Krook], *De roemruchtige zegepraal van de veldslag bij Hoogstet*, Amsterdam 1704; *Het verlose Brabant en Vlaanderen, door de veldslag bij Rammellies*, Amsterdam 1706; *De nederlaag der Seine, door de veldslag bij Oudenaarde, 't bemachtigen van Rijssel, en verdere overwinningen*, Amsterdam 1709.

³ Cornelis van der Haven, ‘Patriotism and Bellicism in Dutch and German Epics of the Enlightenment’, in: *Aradia* 47 (2012) 2, p. 1-24, 6-8.

⁴ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self. Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven/London 2004, p. 187.

“otherness” of military subjects and focused on their extraordinary behavior and appearance. The “military” represented a well-delineated category of identity that remained in a way exotic and different in the audience’s perception. As with classical heroism in tragedy, the spectacle in these re-enactments on stage kept the acting characters at a distance—either as suffering bodies or as sublime commanders who did not fight and were pure minded⁵—and so made their experience of the war act invisible to the audience. Theatrical imaginations of military identity by way of “the spectacle” thus produced (military) bodies on stage without feelings or emotions. The authors of tragedy, in contrast, tried to open classical heroism in order to transform war into an experience that could be entered by observing the emotions of the acting individual from an inward-looking perspective. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s short drama *Philotas* (1759), for instance, critically discusses the fascination with war as a game that is solely based on the rituals, rules, and chivalric principles of honor. The tragic young fighter, Philotas, is not able to escape the rules of the play and his detached ‘theatrical’ vision of war as a game is transformed by Lessing into an experience of horror, pain, and pity.⁶

In my paper, I discussed “war plays” as they were presented on the eighteenth-century stage in relation to how the audience’s identification with “the military” was realized or prohibited by means of theatricality. In theatre plays, even in “epic drama,” the artistic representation of the heroic individual’s behavior is not realized by distanced poetic words of praise only (as in epic poetry), but it is his acting as such that is presented on stage. The actors who play the roles of warriors have to imagine themselves as being in a fight, just as the theatre public is expected to in the course of its aesthetic identification with the players. Not for nothing, it is this *locus* of the theater that is deeply rooted in Western military strategy. The metaphor of “theater of war” enables military strategists (especially since Clausewitz) to imagine the playing field of war events from a panoramic point of view⁷, i.e. as a theater with a stage (the battlefield) and with actors (officers and soldiers) who can be commanded by a group of directors (military staff). At the same time these directing professionals constitute the audience. Citizens, the suffering population in cities and villages, are nothing more than entourage, a part of the scenery.

One could say that it is this image of war as theater that transforms war into the directors’ playing tool instead of a game governed by equal individuals in combat. Even the epic duel is losing importance on stage, whereas it is this man-to-man-fight that is essential to the *cultuur-functie* (cultural function) of fight as play, in the definition of Huizinga. Knowing the enemy and regarding him as an “equal,” or at least as being bound to equal rules of the ‘game,’ is essential for considering war as a game based on the ideal of the heroic man-to-man fight:

We can talk of a *krijg* (a battle) as a cultural function, as long as this battle is waged within a circle, of which the members see each other as equals or at least as having equal rights.⁸

⁵ Harari, Y.N., *The Ultimate Experience. Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, Hampshire/New York 2008, p. 119-123.

⁶ Gregory H. Wolf, ‘Lessing’s *Philotas*: A Problematization of Self-Sacrifice within the Context of Duty and Honor’, in: *Michigan Germanic Studies* 22 (1996) 1, p. 1-21 and Klaus Bohnen, ‘„Was ist ein Held ohne Menschenliebe!“ (*Philotas*, 7. Auftr.). Zur literarischen Kriegsbewältigung in der deutschen Aufklärung’, in: Peter Freimark etc. (eds.), *Lessing und die Toleranz*, Detroit 1986, p. 23-38.

⁷ On ‘panoramic war’ in the late 18th century see: Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War. Performance, Politics, and Society 1793-1815*, Oxford 1995, p. 74-78.

⁸ ‘Van den krijg kan men spreken als cultuurfunctie, zoolang hij gevoerd wordt binnen een kring, waarvan de leden elkander als gelijken of althans gelijkgerechtigden erkennen.’ Joan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, Haarlem 1938, p. 128.

If we take Huizinga's definition of war play as our point of departure, we may come to the hypothesis that the theatrical imagination of war (and especially the military-strategist utopia called "theater of war") creates even a greater distance from the "cultural element of war" than does epic poetry. The fighting individual is absorbed by the theatre of war; he gets lost on the battlefield as an invisible part of the war machine. Fighters on both sides are equally transformed into puppets of a huge theatrical war play, mere bodies on stage that neither think nor feel.⁹ Here, the ambition to bridge the gap between soldiers, strategists, and those who watch (and undergo) these military performances (the citizens, the audience) becomes important—and is something for which I would like to use the term "bellicism."¹⁰ This ambition to understand the role of the individual participants and their experiences while acting on the battlefield, as well as the attempt to imagine the event as a strategic maneuver from the perspective of the all-governing strategist, could be seen as typical for the eighteenth century and for what we call the "military Enlightenment."¹¹

In my paper, I discussed three different modes of identification in relation to these three different categories of "war play": military re-enactments on stage (imagining the military event), the maneuvers in the field as a public military spectacle (imagining military identity), and the transformation of the epic military hero into a "man of feeling" in the case of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's tragedy *Philotas* (imagining military experience). The "bellicist" approach to war in literature implies that the unattached observer is able to "come closer" to the experience of the fighting hero, which also means that a kind of fusion takes place between the roles of "player" and observer. To imagine what the military hero feels and experiences during a war act means that the observer is not only confronted with heroism as such, but also with the hero's horror, pain, and pity. The glorifying epic-war hero is reshaped into a more "human" hero who feels, suffers, and has his doubts about the rightfulness of his own behavior. The "military Enlightenment" in the context of eighteenth-century theatrical war plays means that the theatre play is an instrument for examining the psychology and emotions of "military actors" as well as for bridging the gap between observer and participant. Eighteenth-century "war play" can be seen as a free space that enables observers to experiment with war experiences from the perspective of the participant. The "war theatre" then no longer forms a barrier between the worlds of audience (observer, citizens) and players (participants, military actors) but is transformed into the experimental sphere of a game, governed by equal, fighting individuals in Huizinga's definition. Since Lessing's protagonist, Philotas, is blinded by his own expectations of patriotic war heroics, he is not able to make use of this free space for reconsidering his own position in a war game governed by states and princes (but carried out by citizens).¹² The idea of war as a play is exemplified by the protagonist in a short sham fight in which he restages (in a state of ecstasy) the situation on the battlefield at the moment of being captured by the enemy. The battlefield's harsh reality has led to a disappointing experience and in order to reimagine his own acting as "heroic," the "hero" has to replay the situation and give his story a more heroic ending with a suicide:

⁹ Yuval Harari, *The Ultimate Experience. Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000*, Hampshire/New York 2008, p. 95 ff.

¹⁰ I use the definition of: Jörg Leonhard, *Bellizismus und Nation. Kriegsdeutung und Nationsbestimmung in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten 1750-1914*, München 2008.

¹¹ Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, p. 127 ff.

¹² About the game motif in *Philotas*: Gisbert Ter-Nedden, 'Philotas und Aias, oder Der Kriegsheld im Gefangenendilemma. Lessings Sophokles-Modernisierung und die Lektüre durch Gleim, Bodmer und die Germanistik', in: Wolfgang Adam and Holger Dainat (eds.), „Krieg ist mein Lied“: *Der Siebenjährige Krieg in den zeitgenössischen Medien*, Göttingen 2007, p. 317-378, 323-328.

– Again surrounded? – Horror! – It is I! I am surrounded! What now? Mates! Friends! Brothers! Where are you? All death? Enemies everywhere? – Everywhere? – Here, Philotas! Hah! Take it, bold guy! And there! – And there! (lashing out).¹³

The sham fight ends in a fight against his own imperfection: the enemy is everywhere, and the enemy is also within the hero. Comrades and enemies are equalized and when the main protagonist kills himself, the border between play and reality definitely fades away. This crucial moment in Lessing's play confronts the audience with the double role of the protagonist, who is both actor and observer of his own acting. This ambiguity—is Philotas an observer, or is he a participant?—derives from the two options the protagonist faces. He can either be absorbed by the heroic expectations of the game or reject them. If he does the latter, he lays down the sword but withstand the heroic expectations of the public who observe his game.

Lessing's hero is not able to take advantage of his role as a player in the war game as experimental space. Though the moment of his self-fight is presented to the audience as a possible turning point in the tragedy, there is no real change in his behavior or in his attitude toward the reality of war. Philotas' patriotic blindness and enthusiasm in the end disqualify him from the game he is playing; it is only the observer of his game who realizes that war always ends up as a very non-heroic experience. Lessing confronts us here with the dangers of public blindness to atrocities originating in patriotic war enthusiasm. Huizinga refers to the "spirit of the community" as a force in cultural history that searches again and again to escape the terrible spectacle of war by transforming it into an aesthetic social fiction, "the honorable war."¹⁴ The Dutch historian wrote this in 1938 and I think that we should be very careful before relating modern nationalism and war culture to "human instincts" or "natural feelings of competition." Warlike nationalism, in fact, depends on the myth of "agonal" warfare as a *natural* element of human culture—and if we in our scholarship present this not as a myth but as a precondition for healthy nations (as, for instance, Martin van Creveld does in his *The Culture of War*, 2008), then we act like agents of modern nationalism (which in its nature is truly warlike). The nation-state still needs the idea of war as a game based on the chivalric principles of honor and bravery in order to survive and to excite its citizens to go into battle; we should not twist things in a way that it suddenly seems to be the citizen who needs warlike nationalism in order to regulate his own "natural" desire for armed competition.

The Enlightenment idea of war as a game confronts us with a twofold approach to the reality of war in the eighteenth century. First, playing war was seen as a way to gain a better understanding of individual participants' experiences of war and of the different positions in the world of war (from the military strategist to the officers and soldiers who carry out the dirty job). Secondly, early eighteenth-century war plays created a better understanding of how war events worked from the position of the strategist, providing the audience with a panoramic overview of war's spectacle. Theatrical spectacles like the great military camps invited the public to imagine being a soldier, adopting military appearance, and wearing the same uniforms as the soldiers during their maneuvers. On the other hand, it was also by way of theatrical performances that the audience was enabled to critically reflect on this masquerade-like adoption of a "military self" and to envision imitated military behavior as artificial, childish, and "unreal." Only if the unattached observers of the game were enabled to understand what war really meant to those who "organized," dominated, and carried out the events, was that

¹³ '– Wieder umringt? – Entsetzen! – Ich bin es! Ich bin umringt! Was nun? Gefährte! Freunde! Brüder! Wo seid ihr? Alle tot? Überall Feinde? – Überall? – Hier durch, Philotas! Ha! Nimm das, Verwegener! Und du das! – Und du das! (um sich hauend).' Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philotas*, in: G.E. Lessing, *Werke*, ed. Karl Eibl (etc.), München 1971, II, pp. 101-126., 124.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

audience seen as capable of criticizing the experientially misleading foundations of war and the false *gloire* of its participants.