Moralizing War: Military Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France

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Though history remembers him better for his many condemnations of war, eighteenth-century French philosophe Voltaire penned works celebrating warfare such as the “Poème de Fontenoy” of 1745 commemorating the French victory at the Battle of Fontenoy during the War of Austrian Succession (1741–48), one of the only great French military victories of the eighteenth century prior to the Revolution. In his eulogy of the battle written in classical alexandrins, Voltaire focuses his praise on Louis XV and the noble officers of the army, making multiple references to the king and Maréchal Maurice de Saxe in addition to painstakingly naming no less than 51 aristocratic officers of the French army in the 348-line poem. In particular, Voltaire glorifies what he sees as the dual identity of these military men, marveling at their transformation from gentlemanly courtiers to fierce warriors of the battlefield:

Comment ces courtisans doux, enjoués, aimables,
Sont-ils dans les combats des lions indomptables?
Quel assemblage heureux de grâces, de valeur!

[How is it that these gentle, jocular, amiable courtiers
Become indomitable lions in combat?
What a happy assemblage of graces and valor!]

Voltaire’s wonder regarding this metamorphosis both reveals the central tenet of early modern aristocratic culture of war in France and hints at the deterioration of this culture that this article proposes to explore.

The above passage and Voltaire’s incessant name-dropping throughout the poem demonstrate the strongly aristocratic ethos that guided pre-Revolutionary warfare, an arena in which princes and noblemen who made up the officer corps of the armed forces battled for prestige and power among themselves. “War was waged in the way that a pair of duelists carried out their pedantic struggle,” Carl von Clausewitz would
later assert; “one battled with moderation and consideration, according to the conventional proprieties…. War was caused by nothing more than a diplomatic caprice, and the spirit of such a thing could hardly prevail over the goal of military honor.”

Indeed, writers of this period frequently used the metaphor of the duel to describe their experience at war. During the early modern period, David A. Bell explains, both war and duels “followed intricate sets of rules and involved scrupulous attention to appearance, gesture, movement, and expression. Both demanded a high degree of physical courage. Both, of course, were socially acceptable arenas for the taking of human life…. Dueling and warfare came together in the (originally medieval) practice of single combat: officers form the opposing sides fighting while their men looked on, as spectators.”

Centered on a code of honor and a strong sense of theatricality, the culture of war in early modern France shared many elements with the elite culture of mondânicité (worldliness) practiced at court and in the upper-crust of Parisian society. Here, noble officers “passed easily from the theater of the aristocracy that was the royal court, with its intrigues and scandals and seductions, to the theater of the aristocracy that was the military campaign, where they could find more of the same. In each arena, they were expected to show the same grace, coolness, and splendor.”

However, Voltaire’s sincere astonishment at the notion of such a “happy union of graces and valor” reflects the deteriorating foundations of this culture of the “courtier-warrior,” which was indeed disintegrating throughout the age of Enlightenment toward a devastating outcome. From the beginning of the eighteenth century until the Revolution, the French army experienced a disastrous decline in combat effectiveness that initiated a general military decay and resulted in a number of grave losses in men, equipment, and territory during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), the War of the Austrian Succession, and the French and Indian/Seven Years’ War (1754–63). This crisis spurred generations of military thinkers—largely French noblemen who formed the officer corps and military administration—to undertake a vast inquiry into almost all areas of the armed forces. Some reform-minded thinkers scrutinized the structures of the military system (tactics, administration, organization, discipline, and command), suggesting changes in policy, practice, and infrastructure, while other reformers theorized about much less tangible subjects, bringing increasing attention to cultural, moral, and educational issues. Many of the latter thinkers believed that the crisis of military performance was closely connected to the disintegration of the traditional “courtier-warrior” military identity and culture within the aristocratic officer corps. They deemed that those whom Voltaire characterized as “gentle, jocular, affable courtiers” were in fact no longer transforming into “indomitable lions in battle,” and that what had been a “happy union of graces and valor” in the space of war had collapsed into a pathetic spectacle of powdered wig-clad fops, timorous to the point of impotence on the battlefield. Many examples fueled this opinion as time and again the French royal army was stifled by inglorious mistakes such as the humiliating tactical defeat at Dettingen in June 1743 during the War of the Austrian Succession, a battle at which French troops—even the prestigious Gardes françaises— took off in panicked flight in the face of the enemy.

The abundance of similar tales of cowardice and defeat convinced military thinkers that the aristocratic culture of war had eroded, its traditional martial values having been replaced by corrupt ones from the highly effeminated, materialistic elite society in Paris and Versailles. As we shall see, these reformers argued that not only had virtuous,