Defining "soldier”: an analysis of the use of military terminology in 18th centur...

ASSIGN BUSTER

Gender and economics were no less intertwined during the eighteenth century than they are today. In the world of emerging paper currency and capitalism, many issues were coming to light for the first time, and so it comes as little surprise that the literature of the day so often focused on economic problems. But not all the issues addressed in eighteenth century literature were new ones. Some, like the economics of the human body, have been present as far back as we can trace in history. Often, this issue is addressed in literature in the form of female prostitution, and eighteenth century literature is no different. However, present in many texts is another form of selling one’s body—that of the soldier, and military service as an economic transaction. For the purposes of this essay, sale of the body will be defined as a circumstance in which the entire transaction revolves around the physical form, in which both buyer and seller are willful participants, and in which the body itself is made vulnerable and placed at the mercy of the buyer. I will be analyzing the depiction of soldiers in Aphra Behn’s The Rover and George Farquhar’s The Recruiting Officer. I argue that the sale of the body for military purposes was not viewed entirely favorably in eighteenth century works. While perhaps not so vilified as prostitutes in their time, the soldiers depicted in the aforementioned plays act as caricatures or satirical figures rather than believable characters. This is highlighted through word choice—the use of the word “ soldier” as opposed to its supposed synonyms draws a clear distinction between the honorable military man and those who act for money alone. While not entirely equivalent to prostitution, this distinction implies something of a correlation between the noble warrior and the genuine lover versus the “ soldier” as defined in this essay and the prostitute. While the former set of figures acts on principle and from a moral

grounding, the latter figures abandon their own principles in favor of profit. This abandonment, regardless of whether it is the product of desperate circumstance, is likely the root of the distaste toward both soldiers and prostitutes found in 18th century literature.

The use of the word “ soldier” as opposed to related words like “ warrior” or “ fighter” is integral to this discussion. According to Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary, which provides us with the most contemporary definitions of the chosen vernacular in the text, “ soldier” stems from the French soldat and the low Latin solidus. “ Soldier” is defined as “ a fighting man, a warrior. Originally one who served for pay.” Interestingly, the etymology of the word gives far more insight into its connection with economics than its definition does. The low Latin solidus referred not to the soldier himself, but rather specifically to his pay (Johnson 1877). The very concept of the soldier is inherently intertwined with ideas of money; this is in stark contrast with the traditional ideals of the warrior as being loyal, honorable, or courageous. Also of note is that Johnson includes the caveat that the term “ soldier” is generally used for the common man, distinct from his commanders. This implies an interconnectivity between status and sacrificing one’s morals for money. While the higher ranking military members might have the privilege of upholding whatever principles they choose, those of lower standing are forced to follow the commands of their superiors in order to make ends meet.

The characters in Aphra Behn’s The Rover are referred to as soldiers only a handful of times. The first of these is of particular note, occurring early in the play, when Florinda says: I’ll not deny I value Belvile: when I was expos’d to

such Dangers as the licens’d lust of common Soldiers threatned, when Rage and Conquest flew thro the City—then Belvile, this Criminal for my sake, threw himself into all Dangers to save my Honour, and will you not allow him my Esteem? (Behn 6) In this line, we see soldiers used in fairly derogatory terms. Paired with words like “ common” and “ lust,” it creates a less-than-favorable image of the soldier as a vile and unrefined figure in Florinda’s mind. The word is juxtaposed with her description of Belvile as her savior, who she defines as a criminal for her own sake as opposed to using any more traditional heroic imagery. Through this, Behn paints the soldiers as more lowly than criminal. Although their actions would have been considered acceptable in their circumstance, and Belvile’s considered the act of a traitor in hindering them, it is the soldiers who are truly at fault. We see that the morality of the soldiers is reined in by the superior; it is understood that they are not only obliged to his guidance in having sold themselves, but in need of it. Independent of Belvile, they demonstrate little in the way of moral values.

The only other instance of the word “ soldier” appearing in dialogue occurs when Angellica first addresses Willmore: “ You Sir in Buff, you that appear a Soldier, that first began this Insolence” (Behn 25). This occurs in the midst of a confrontation between the Spaniards and the cavaliers, and so it is obvious there is no real honor in Angellica’s addressing him as such; it is a simple descriptor based upon his clothing. It is possible this might also be interpreted as insult. In addressing an Officer instead as a soldier, she implies he is lower in status and perhaps in moral grounding. Despite his rank, Willmore does not demonstrate honor, and thereby is deemed

undeserving of any rank higher than soldier according to 18th century standards.

It is important to note that although both Belvile and Willmore are both banished English soldiers, Belvile is referred to far more often in the text as “ cavalier.” Willmore is only classified as such when the group is referenced collectively as “ cavaliers”—he is never independently defined as one. It is possible this is connected to his higher rank—Belville being a Captain whereas Willmore is an Officer—but it is evidenced in the play’s subtitle that both are indeed “ cavaliers,” and therefore could both be referred to as such. According to Johnson’s dictionary, there were a handful of connotations behind the word, but the most relevant seems to be the third: “ The appellation of the party of King Charles the Fifth” (343). This is the definition most closely related to The Rover’s alternate title, The Banished Cavaliers. It would have been obvious to contemporary audiences that this meant they were supporters of king Charles during the English civil war, which explains their relocation from England. This suggests some of the loyalty and honor expected of those who ranked above soldier; Belvile demonstrates this not only in title, but also in action, whereas Willmore does not. Of the other definitions used in the dictionary, “ a horseman; a knight” offers some minor insight into the connotations of sale or economic exchange understood to be related to the term “ cavalier”. To be a horseman or a knight implies a higher standing due to the cost of horses, which he would have been expected to provide himself (Oakeshott 14). Unlike “ soldier”, the connotations behind the word “ cavalier” are largely positive, implying a higher standing in society and greater adherence to own’s own morals.

This brings us to the respective roles played by Belvile and Willmore, and how they fit into certain stereotypes. Belvile, and his relationship with Florinda by extension, fit into a very flighty and idealized perspective. Belvile is gallant, romantic, and honorable—everything Behn seems to think soldiers are not, which is why he is never referred to as a soldier throughout the play. Willmore represents a less romanticized reality. Willmore is not at all romanticized, acting far more in line with reality than his counterpart. His status within society, and the ultimate ending he receives, are not dependent on his conduct throughout the play. He is unreliable, crass, and promiscuous. He behaves in line with how the soldiers are described in Florinda’s line early in the play: lustful and common. It makes sense, then, that Willmore is the only of the two that should be defined as a “ soldier” within the characters’ discussions. Belvile being most commonly referred to as “ cavalier” is dependent upon his own good behavior.

This brings one to question how economics might be acting within these understandings. If the soldier, as understood by Johnson’s definition, is one who is fighting for money, then it is safe to assume that there would be little standard as to his own conduct. The soldier is not required to be brave, honorable, or trustworthy. He is merely required to fight, and expects to be paid for it. This is why Willmore is able to get away with his behavior; it is for the same reason that Belvile does not fall into this category, as his actions as a military figure are not dependent upon money alone. Returning once more to the dictionary, examples given for use of the word “ soldier” do not point toward any honor associated with the term. One of interest is drawn from Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, and goes as follows: “ This attempt I’m soldier to,

and will abide by it with a prince’s courage” (Johnson 1877). Here, we see that the idea of courage is associated not with the term “ soldier,” but rather with “ prince.” It highlights the origins of the term as not associated with acts of bravery or prowess while simultaneously drawing a comparison between stations that places the higher rank as more virtuous than the lower. Could this be because of the economic connotations and the association between soldiership and sale of the body? It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty, but it certainly seems to imply that the idea of a soldier was not one of any great courage or virtue during the 18th century.

This leads us to question the significance of the role reversal that takes place between Angellica and Willmore. In their exchange, Angellica ultimately gives Willmore money as opposed to the other way around, despite the fact that Angellica is the prostitute (Behn 34). This seems to hint at the correlation between soldiering and prostitution. It also furthers the argument that the true sale of the body occurs when one sacrifices one’s morals. Willmore, in seducing Angellica through his own deception, has assumed the role of the prostitute. It is therefore only fitting that he should be the one receiving pay. Angellica, on the other hand, believes herself to be in love. She acts not for money but rather for her own beliefs, and it would therefore be inappropriate for her to receive pay for these actions. This undoubtedly is meant as a commentary on the relationship between their two professions. As a “ soldier,” Willmore’s actions are driven by concern only for himself and never for any particular virtue. In this way, the soldier is very much a parallel for the stereotype of the prostitute, which Angellica herself is attempting in this scene to shrug off.

It is not to The Rover alone that this analysis might be applied. George Farquhar’s The Recruiting Officer is a relatively contemporary text dealing in related issues. Within the opening lines of the text, we see the word soldier being used once more in a derogatory sense, and by a military character, Kite: “ For you must know, gentlemen, that I am a man of honour: besides, I don’t beat up for common soldiers; no, I list only grenadiers; grenadiers, gentlemen” (Farquhar 164). Once more, we see the rank of soldier being placed beneath all others. It is depicted as something less favorable than other titles, and it comes as little wonder that the figure of the rake—here, present in Captain Plume as it is also present in Willmore in The Rover—is once more referred to as soldier repeatedly throughout the text, despite the actual rank he holds. This further emphasizes the correlation between sexual promiscuity and soldiering, which in turn further aligns the soldier with the prostitute.

It is worth noting, however, that The Recruiting Officer does not use “ soldier” in so consistent a negative sense as The Rover does. There is an occurrence of the word being used as a positive descriptor, but it is quickly shot down. This happens in an exchange between Captain Brazen and Melinda. The latter refers to soldiers as “ the best bred men,” to which Brazen replies: “ Some of us, madam; but there are brutes among us too, very sad brutes; for my own part, I have always had the good luck to prove agreeable” (Farquhar 196). Brazen goes on to brag about his own character and prospects in a very foppish manner, and therefore could be argued to discredit his own character just as much as he attempts to discredit others. It is possible this is presented as a way of addressing any counterargument in

defense of soldiers—we see someone speak highly of soldiers within the text, and we even see it acknowledged that there are both good and bad men that might be defined as such, but ultimately the opinions of neither character are entirely reliable and thus the reader must once again conclude that the word “ soldier” is filled with negative connotation.

While this perception of soldiers as being of poor character seems to be pervasive in eighteenth century texts, it is not without explanation. Mary Wollstonecraft attempted to draw a comparison between the position of soldiers and women in society in her essay A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, where she states: “ As proof that education gives this appearance of weakness to females, we may instance the example of military men, who are, like them, sent into the world before their minds have been stored with knowledge and fortified by principles” (Norton 500). She goes on to explain that both soldiers and women are educated only superficially, retaining bits and pieces of knowledge that they overhear in conversation and understand through interaction, but rarely understanding anything at a deeper level than can be understood through casual observation. The most important part of this argument in defining the attitude toward soldiers is the concept Wollstonecraft introduces of manners before morals—that is, that soldiers learn how to present themselves without understanding any substance or standard behind it. This serves as explanation for the lecherous and rakish depiction of soldiers in eighteenth century literature. While characters like Willmore and Captain Plume know enough to present themselves well in certain social situations, they are in reality lacking in moral understanding and therefore tend to behave in a lowly fashion.

It comes as little surprise, then, that a society that placed so much value on virtue and morality would frown upon soldiers. At best they are naïve, and at worst they are ignorant. The use of the term “ soldier” throughout texts like The Rover and The Recruiting Officer is inconsistent with our use of the term in the modern world. The 18th century “ soldier” was understood, at least in literature, to be driven by money and personal profit over anything resembling virtue or honor, much in the same way as a prostitute might have been. The characters in these plays are a stereotype, juxtaposing the ignorance in characters like Willmore against the more gallant and heroic archetype of Belvile, in order to offer a commentary on the “ soldier” versus the honorable military man of good standing. Ultimately, neither can be interpreted as an entirely accurate depiction of the military figure. Both play into a preconceived notion of how “ soldier” should be defined. While this might offer some insight into the prejudices of the 18th century, it must be observed with some skepticism. Theatre is known for its caricatures and satirical nature; to determine whether the biases present in 18th century plays were pervasive in contemporary society would require additional research. Nevertheless, it is clear that the “ soldier” did act as one of these archetypical figures within the theatre, however representative of the attitudes of society this might have been.

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