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# WOMEN AGAINST NAPOLEON

Historical and Fictional Responses to his  
Rise and Legacy





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About half of the articles in this collection examine fictional responses to Napoleon and the Napoleonic wars. A few remarks on the implication of biological sex and traditional gender roles in historical narratives that thematize war or have a wartime setting, suffice here to provide the theoretical background. Historical fiction, especially the more popular kind that is often turned into feature films, tends to perpetuate traditional social roles of men as warriors for the just cause and of women nurturing children, patiently awaiting the return of their heroic men, and tending to the wounded. The female fighter and soldier as a heroine was and continues to remain a rare exception, and often is, apparently, more of a sexualized curiosity and a device for suspense than a realistic depiction and encouragement of female participation in military conflicts. Images of erotic young women, faithfully waiting lovers and wives, and self-sacrificing mothers predominate. The portrayal of "masculine" matters of war continues to reinforce cultural constructs of the traditionally circumscribed and anti-belligere woman.

The interrelation of women and war is much more complex than a simple dichotomy (men fight and lead wars, whereas women are victims of war, or in Margarete Mitscherlich's term are "the peaceable sex"). Women's relationship to and involvement in war is a growing field not only in literary scholarship, but also in a number of other disciplines and it has gained momentum in political debates as well. Joshua Goldstein's recent interdisciplinary collection of essays traces the effects of war on gender and the influence of gender on war across cultures. Goldstein concludes that killing in war does not come naturally for men or women, and that gender norms often shape men, women, and children to the needs of the war system. He observes that the image of a woman holding both a rifle and a baby is widespread among cultures as an image for liberation movements.

The anthology *War, Gender, and Literary Representation* by Helen Cooper theorized the intersections of research on gender and narratology of war, configuring the literary relationship between war and gender as early as 1989. The articles in that anthology pinpoint literature as being instrumental in perpetuating the ancient essentialist war myth. The essays examine the gendered mutual influence of war and literary representation from the Trojan wars to the Arab-Israeli conflicts and the nuclear age. The collection also investigates conventional war texts (texts that depict men who fight, and women who are keepers of the peace) and points out "that women's role in relation to war is much more complex and often complicitous" (XV). Not until World War I was there a wide variety of literary responses to war by women writers; in the 20th century, this array includes war perceived as liberation from the domestic sphere, as an embracing of war efforts, and, at the other extreme, women who abandoned the battle for feminist issues during times of war. While it is convincing that especially for twentieth-century texts, the dichotomy of the male fighter and the female peacemaker fails, our collection seeks to expand awareness of the nineteenth-century discourse of women and war, especially as it involves the discourse of the nation.