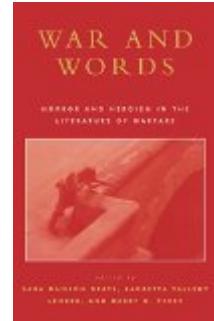




Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, Merry G. Perry, eds.. *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. 353 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-0579-5.



Reviewed by James Westheider

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Robert E. Lee once remarked, "It is well that war is so terrible. We should grow too fond of it," indicating the ambivalent nature of humankind's relationship to the most destructive of its institutions--war. War has been portrayed as a heroic and glorious adventure, or an evil that destroys and kills, and as bringing out the best and the worst in individuals and societies. In *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*, Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker, and Merry G. Perry examine this duality and contend that it is deeply ingrained in Western culture, and that it is not the simple war versus peace, or male versus female dichotomy that has often pervaded Western literature. Instead, it is a phenomenon complicated by issues of race, religion, class, and gender, as well as the way a given society interprets war. Ultimately, the language we use to describe it also shapes the way we perceive the world. Our understanding of war is largely a social construct, "thus the meaning of war alters as various cultures interpret the meaning of the experience differently" (p. 4). This un-

derlying concept provides both the organizing principle and the rationale for the study.

The book itself is divided into two sections. The first is titled "Arms and Man: Voices from the Center," wherein essays by a wide range of contributors examine the ambivalence to war embodied in an extensive array of sources including the old and new testaments, the Greek epics, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Orwell, and Hemingway. Darrell J. Fasching, for example, investigates the notion of "Holy War" in poetry, and the links between violence and what is sacred to a given society. He postulates that holy war is not unique to radical Muslims, but that to some extent all wars are ultimately holy wars, in that a society will always reveal what is truly sacred to it, and what its people are willing to fight and die for. Often this involves preserving, or forcing one's own way of life on others, be it religious, political or cultural. Adolph Hitler and Osama bin Laden, for example, both divided up the world into believers and non-believers; for bin Laden the non-believers were secular Americans, and for Hitler, the Jews, but both argued they were doing the will of God and

defending rightful civilization against inferior or corrupt societies. Hitler's declaration that he believed he was "acting in the will of the Almighty Creator Y I am fighting for the work of the Lord", could easily have been voiced by bin Laden, but also by most other would be conquerors throughout history (p.20).

No discussion of war and literature would be complete without an examination of William Shakespeare, particularly one of his most debated plays, *Henry V*, and whether it is an epic glorification of Henry as the ideal Christian warrior king, or, as some have postulated, a trenchant satire. Sara Munson Deats concludes it is a bit of both, and could be read either way depending on the perspective--and times--of the reader. To illustrate her point she draws an interesting, if inconclusive, parallel between Henry's invasion of France and George Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003. Other essays explore the writings of such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, George Orwell, Herman Melville, and Ernest Hemingway.

Some of these writers, such as Shaw, were committed pacifists, and delighted in "making war on war," but even those authors who were generally viewed as exalting war could often articulate its brutality and horrors. James Meredith, for example, argues that despite Hemingway's seeming glorification of war and his reputation as a "hawk," his writings actually reveal a deep ambivalence to war, as illustrated in two of "Papa's" most famous war related works, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Across the River and into the Trees*.

The second section of the book, "Arms and the Other: Voices from the Margins," looks at the literary sources and traditions that until recently, "have been muted and marginalized by our patriarchal society", giving voice to women, minorities and others that have traditionally been left out of the martial ethos (p. 10). Defining who belonged on the margins was not always easy. One of the most important voices from the margin, and from a feminist perspective, was Virginia Woolf. Merry

M. Pawlowski contends that though Woolf is now firmly entrenched as a literary giant, at the time she was writing arguably her best antiwar and antifascist piece, *Three Guineas*, she would have easily fit the definition of being out of the mainstream. She was not however, out of touch with her society or her times, and combined the issue of impending war with that of full equality for women.

The issue of race and military service is also explored in several essays. In "War of Words: War >with' and >against' in African American Literature," Charles Hegler explores the inherent contradiction involved in African Americans fighting in war for the United States to demonstrate their worth as citizens and their right to full equality and yet often being literally at war with an America that denies them their just rights. Many of the essays attempt to find connections between past writings and modern day conflict. The last essay in Part Two, "Epilogue: Marlowe *in tempore belli*," by Leah S. Marcus, attempts to make a connection between Christopher Marlowe's *Tamberlaine* plays, arguing that his plays offer valuable insight not only into today's troubles in the Middle East, but also how they might have been interpreted in the writer's own lifetime. The various essays are illuminating and do help to make the author's point, but on other issues the revelations are not as profound. The authors also wanted to question the "traditional" interpretation of war as an "inevitable manifestation of natural human, aggressive instincts," arguing instead that it is a human institution designed to "achieve specific societal goals at particular historic moments" (p. 5). Few serious military historians theorize any longer that the propensity for organized violence is innate, and the conception of war as a rational instrument of policy is hardly a radical new thesis; one has to look no farther than Machiavelli or Clautzwitz for that paradigm.

War of Words would probably appeal more to students and scholars of western literature and

probably less so to military historians and theorists, but it is an insightful and thought provoking study, and should be read by anyone interested in the literature of war and how western society views this important and destructive institution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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