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Article:

Vernon, Katie (2024) Forgotten Battles: Gender in the Armouries. *Aspectus* (6).

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-5njs-fd43>

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Forgotten Battles: Gender in the Armouries

Katie Vernon

Forgotten Battles: Gender in the Armouries at The Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds
September 2023 to November 2024

Created by volunteers and researchers who identify under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella

Katie Vernon TBC is a current PhD candidate at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York. Her interdisciplinary research examines the arms and armour of Middle English romance, focusing on three under-represented groups: craftspeople, clerics and women. Katie's interests also include public history and heritage, with a portfolio of research assistant and digital curation work. More recently, Katie has been researching depictions of arms and armour in video games, with open-access work in press.

Forgotten Battles: Gender in the Armouries sheds new light on the gendered and queer ownership of arms and armour. The not-for-profit Leeds City of Culture 2023 spearheaded several collaborative cultural and community projects, including the National Lottery Heritage funded "Hidden Stories" at the Royal Armouries. The Leeds 2023 project has presented a programme of events and exhibitions celebrating the city's diversity, with a strand focused on women and the queer community. The result of this strand is the *Forgotten Battles* exhibition housed on the first floor of the Armouries with an accompanying museum-wide trail. The exhibition and trail, while small and temporary, provides a window into neglected stories of historical gender and arms/armour, paving the way for future work of this kind. It particularly shines through its artistic responses demonstrating the importance of these historical stories on local marginalised communities.

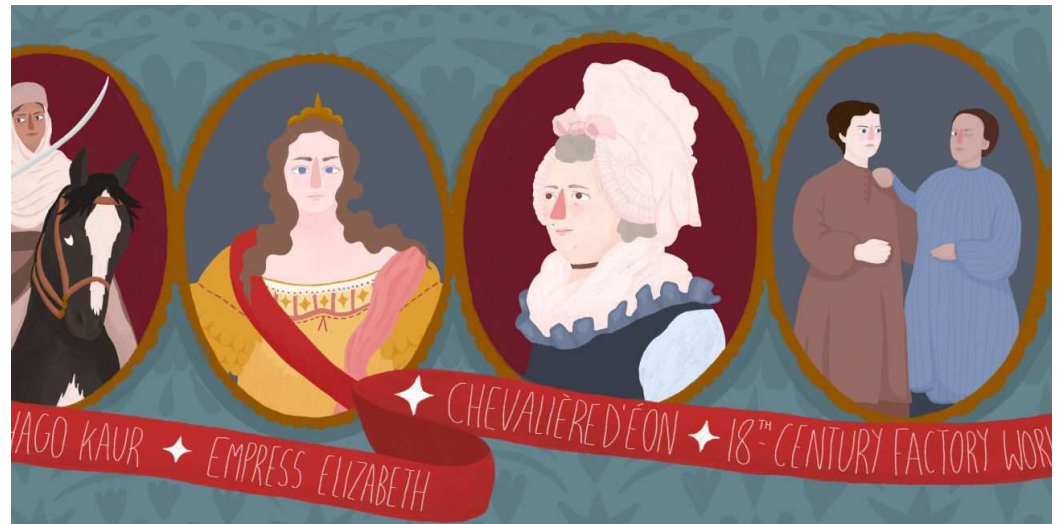
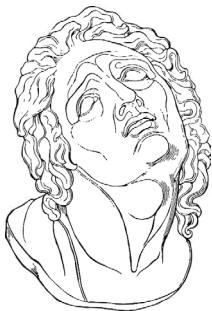


Figure 1. "Forgotten Battles," Royal Armouries, accessed September 15, 2024. <https://royalarmouries.org/objects-and-stories/stories/forgotten-battles>.

The first-floor exhibition space houses a series of contemporary art responses to ten items from the museum collections. It is the output of a community collaboration, created by researchers and volunteers from Leeds who identify as LGBTQIA+. The exhibition tone and language are well-pitched for visitors who might not already be familiar with the terminology, displaying a series of definitions regarding gendered and queer identities. These definitions enable a more level playing field for visitors to then engage with the other signage which discuss in a more complex way themes such as intersectionality and colonialism. These captions also explain why, due to a historical connection to women, the medium of textile was

chosen for some responses. In a museum filled with so much metal, such multimedia works stand out.

There are ten objects viewable across the museum through an accompanying trail beginning at the exhibition. There is a free printed booklet containing a map of the items' locations, photos of each object and a paragraph of information about the item. By each object is a QR code to access further textual information and photographs, all of which is also available on the website. These are well-chosen examples from across the world, from the period of the Roman Empire to the modern day. They act as an important reminder that women and queer communities worldwide have always been involved in combat and wielded weapons. Likewise, the trail provides a thought-provoking view of the items in situ, enabling us to reflect on how curatorship has traditionally privileged certain stories.

Figure 2. Magdalena Watson, *Lady Death Prints*, 2023, 29.7cm x 42 cm. Royal Armouries, Leeds, Collection of the Artist. Author's photograph.



Figure 3. Annan Affotey, *Portrait of Yaa Asantewaa*, 2023, 59 cm x 42 cm. Royal Armouries, Leeds, Collection of the Artist. Author's photograph



Responses to the trail items are in the form of contemporary artwork, including portraiture, sculpture, film, and textile works. Portraiture tells stories of women involved in historical arms-bearing. Works by Magdalena Watson and Annan Affotey depict women active in wars during the twentieth century with their guns of choice: sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko and the Commander in Chief and riflewoman Yaa Asantewaa, respectively. As a key theme of the exhibition and trail is unfolding narratives of the women behind the weapons, many of the artworks are displayed alongside paraphernalia relating to the women who inspired them. Alongside portraits of Pavlichenko, this includes a small comic book by Watson depicting two Second World War sniper women (Pavlichenko and Faye Schulman) during their active duty. The varied nature of this exhibition enables the works to playfully explore contrasts in tone and medium. A sculpture by an anonymous artist re-imagines how the medieval “ballock” dagger communicates gender with a work made from dolls dressed up with the phallic imagery associated with “Hen Dos.” Through such juxtapositions, the exhibition explores different facets of how weapons and gender intersect.

A key thematic strand is the construction of gender across time. A response to this is the “Queering the Tudors” short film directed by Cat Stiles and with photographic stills by Rob Freeman. The film’s audio recites lines from sixteenth-century works which provide a gender-bent perspective. Actors in this piece use dress as an external signifier of constructing or performing gender. For example, the Drag King Billy Butch is filmed in the performative act of painting his beard. Similarly, the actor India McKenzie depicts Elizabeth I binding their chest while the monarch’s Tilbury speech about having the body of a woman but the heart of a man, is recited. David Perry depicts the armoured Henry VIII, with the Tudor King’s suit of armour, made to present masculinised ideals, as one of the key items on the object trail. Such work accessibly explores how gender identities have always been performed and constructed according to shifting social ideologies.

Notable artworks also include the erasure poetry embroidered alongside images of items from the collection, using museum object labels. Doing so encourages a viewer to consider the key strand of erasure in the museum, a theme which becomes particularly stark when undertaking the object trail around the museum.

Many of the original labels have no reference at all to the object’s connections to women. However, the QR sticker by each item reveals much more about the item’s past and provides further interpretation. For example, the code for a Roman scabbard reveals that while one of its depicted figures in armour is usually assumed to be male, considering that all the other depicted figures are female gods, we could interpret the armoured one as another female goddess: Bellona, goddess of war.

The trail therefore encourages the viewer to re-evaluate their perspectives and unconscious biases, especially prominent in traditional discussion of arms and armour. As the trail unfolds, the scale of missing information from traditional museum labelling becomes unsettling, something museum practitioners are aware of more generally, but is often yet to be addressed. While this exhibition points out crucial flaws in museum interpretation, it is noteworthy that the trail ends in November and presumably the legacy labels will remain. One hopes that the Armouries will take forward its innovation in this project, whether incorporating findings into the original labels, or even building on the QR trail as an avenue to showcase a more nuanced interpretation to in person visitors and, due to the accessible short-form content on the website, digital audiences.

In line with the way the Royal Armouries does not shy away from more difficult topics is the discussion of how marginalised groups are associated with these items, both for positive and

negative reasons. The series of guns nicknamed “Black Bess” is appropriately noted for its use in enabling the right of women to inherit the Hapsburg throne, but also its use during the colonisation of India, where subsequent British law decimated the Hijra community, a third gender. Such narratives are important in acknowledging the complex pasts of items of war.

Figure 4. Presentation Sword, ca. 1777. This sword was commissioned by Chevalière d’Éon
© The Royal Armouries



An object trail, with items remaining in situ, does prove to have disadvantages. Objects which could be centre staged are unfortunately almost hidden by the vast amount of material in shared display cases. This is particularly evident with the sword of la Chevalière d’Éon which should be the star of the exhibition: a gift sword commissioned by an eighteenth-century trans-woman who was a spy, diplomat, and fencing master. Chevalière d’Éon’s story and her wider pan-European connections are engagingly told in the digital information for the sword. Telling her story is particularly essential in this current time of hostility towards trans people, yet the way it is displayed at the back of the case provides an ironic metaphor for how such people have been traditionally sidelined in historical discussions.

The exhibit is a greatly encouraging step for thinking about how we re-orientate more traditional museums to tell the hidden stories of the past, highlighting intersectionality in their collections. Forgotten Battles shows us how we can bring forward lost voices in museums to reinterpret narratives of the past. The exhibition successfully reorientates the public view of arms and armour from an expression of masculinities to instead consider these items through the lens of women and the queer community.