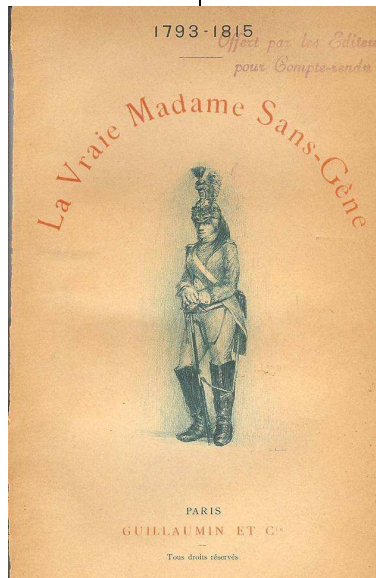


La Vraie Madame Sans-Gêne: Women Soldiers in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Armies, 1792-1815

Susan P. Conner

It was October of 1893, and the location was the Théâtre de Vaudeville. The curtain had just risen on Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau's four-act play, and rave reviews were being dispatched from the Paris press. The play was titled simply, "Madame Sans-Gêne," and it was based, very loosely, on the life of Catharine Hübscher, who became *la maréchale* Lefebvre, duchesse de Danzig, under the First Empire. As a former *blanchisseuse*, she had allegedly washed and ironed Bonaparte's clothes when he was yet a corporal. Napoleon had overlooked her lack of grace, lack of education, and lack of appropriate comportment when he named her husband the first among the first: a *maréchal* of the French Empire. She was indeed earthy, irreverent, foul mouthed and scatological when it suited her, comfortable with herself especially when she made others feel uncomfortable, and scarcely the kind of women one might have expected in the imperial court of Napoleon I. She was, to say the least, the ideal subject for a play. When Sardou and Moreau dubbed her "Mme Sans-Gêne," they adopted a common definition: someone who did not care, someone who was carefree and who lived life with abandon, and

someone who simply was incapable of embarrassment. "Mme Sans-Gêne" was the equivalent of "Mrs. No Embarrassment," "Madame Doesn't Care," or Mrs. Devil-May-Care," as the play was variously translated.¹



The play, which was converted into a novel and translated for foreign audiences, soon took on a life of its own. The novel began: "In the rue de Bondy, lighted lamps smoked and showed entrance to the popular ball, the Vaux-Hall. This ball, with its fantastic name, was directed by citizen Joly, an artist of the 'Théâtre des Arts'.... Revolution thundered in the very streets."² From laundress in turbulent revolutionary years, through difficult times, to her marriage to and life with a sometimes brave, always

¹ Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau, *Madame Sans-Gêne: comédie en trois actes* (1894). Among the earliest English translations is *Madame Sans-Gêne—Madame Devil-May-Care: a comedy in three acts* (New York and London: S. French, 1901). Various translations of the title may also be found in the Internet Movie Database at <http://www.imdb.com>.

² Louis Pelletier, *Madame Sans-Gêne: An Historical Romance Founded on the Play by Victorien Sardou, Translated from the French by Louie R. Heller* (New York: Home Book Company, 1895), 1.

common, and frequently lackluster man, the romanticized life of *la maréchale* Lefebvre was portrayed. She straightened out quarrels, strategized with members of the imperial inner circle, and played roles beyond her sex. The story always took her back to the formerly unknown artillery officer who had become emperor. According to the story, their lives had taken different turns, but difficulties with Marshal Lefebvre often brought them back onto the same pathway. In the final scene of the novel as *la maréchale* and Napoleon resolved their personal family woes, “Napoleon lifted Catharine’s face and kissed her—a mark of unusual favor at his court. ‘Good night, Madame Sans-Gêne,’ he said.”³ The die had been cast; because of Sardou, Moreau, and Lepelletier, the name Mme Sans-Gêne seemed indelibly linked to *la maréchale* Lefebvre. Shortly, the novel was also made into an opera and a film.⁴

³ Pelletier, *Madame Sans-Gêne*, 400.

⁴ Additional renderings of the Madame Lefebvre/Madame Sans-Gêne story include a three-act opera by Umberto Giordano that debuted in New York in 1915 and was conducted by Arturo Toscanini, a 1911 film directed by Henri Desfontaines, a 1924 film that starred Gloria Swanson, a 1934 radio show that also featured Gloria Swanson, a 1944 film produced in Argentina, and a 1962 multinational film (produced by Embassy Pictures) that starred Sophia Loren. According to a review of the 1962 film on Wikipedia, the cost was \$6,000,000 including “lavish period sets and costumes designed for Loren by Marcel Escoffier and Itala Scandariato.” The most recent work is a biography of Madame Lefebvre titled, “Madame Sans-Gêne: une femme du peuple à la cour de Napoléon” which was published by Christophe Nagyous in 2001 (Strasbourg, La Nuée bleue). The opera and play continue to be performed.

Somewhere else in Paris in 1893, however, Emile Cère was also working. An historian of the Napoleonic period, he was familiar with archival materials held by the *Service historique de l’Armée* at Vincennes, including two cartons of records of women who had served in the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies from 1792 until 1815.⁵ In one carton was a published manuscript written by Marie-Thérèse Figueur, who was later known as Madame Sutter when she married. It had been written over fifty years earlier and it chronicled military service that had spanned twenty-three years; it was the memoir of a woman who had experienced four horses being shot out from under her, who had been wounded a number of times, and who had been a prisoner of war almost as long as she had been a combatant. She had been christened by her fellow volunteers as “Sans-Gêne” when she went into combat with her uncle in 1793 as a member of a company of federalist cannoneers who were defending Avignon against the Convention. Later she served as a dragoon in the 15th and 9th regiments of the French Army. It was not her earthy tongue, social irreverence, or proximity to Napoleon that commanded her name; it was her seeming fearlessness under fire. Unlike the meaning that Sardou and Moreau had given to the description of Mme Lefebvre, to Cère, “Sans-Gêne” had a more specific meaning and a real person on whom

⁵ Service historique de l’Armée de Terre (Vincennes), X^R48 and X^R49. These materials were preserved through the interest of Archivist of the Ministry of War Lèon Hennet.

that title had been conferred. “Sans-Gêne” meant that she was comfortable with herself and fearless in her activities.

Cère, however, was not just concerned with protecting the name of Thérèse Figueur; he was interested in historical accuracy. Popular plays might fire the imagination, but the records of history needed due care and recognition. In 1894, therefore, he published two important works: *Madame Sans-Gêne et les femmes soldats, 1792-1815* (Paris: Plon, 1894) and *La vraie Madame Sans-Gêne: les campagnes de Thérèse Figueur, dragon aux 15^e et 9^e régiments, 1793-1815, écrits sous sa dictée par Saint-Germain LeDuc, préface de M. Emile Cère* (Paris: Guillaumin et C^{ie}, 1894). There was nothing mean-spirited, he mused in his introduction to Figueur’s memoirs, with Sardou and Moreau’s appropriation of the name Sans-Gêne for their historical fiction; but he declared unequivocally, “there were women soldiers (*femmes militaires* or *femmes soldats*) who fought under the tricolored flag during the wars of the revolution and empire.”⁶ They also had claim to recognition. What also fascinated Cère was that only Figueur had actually penned memoirs of her experiences and that only she had actually been called “Sans-Gêne” in her lifetime. *La maréchale* Lefebvre might be

⁶ Figueur, Marie-Thérèse, *La vraie Madame Sans-Gêne: Les campagnes de Thérèse Figueur, Dragon aux 15^e et 9^e Régiments, 1793-1817, Écrits sous sa dictée par Saint-Germain LeDuc, préface de M. Emile Cère* (Paris: Librairie Guillaumin et C^{ie}, 1894), vi. The original manuscript was published in 1842 as *Les campagnes de Mlle Thérèse Figueur, aujourd’hui Madame Veuve Sutter, ex-dragon aux 15^e et 9^e régimens de 1793 à 1815* (Paris: Davin et Fontaine)

identified with the name, but she had not earned it.

For the remainder of this paper, we will look into those cartons at the Service historique de l’Armée de Terre at Vincennes. Who were these *femmes militaires*? Were their actions anomalous in the environment of the eighteenth century and revolution? What was the context for their enlistment in the military, and why were their experiences, in general, so short-lived? What was their legacy?

In the history of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic years, gender has always played an important role, although it has not always been recognized explicitly. Women were ubiquitous in the pre-revolutionary flour wars and *taxation populaire*; and they were equally present in the early years of revolutionary dissent. The language of the revolution opened new avenues for them as *citoyennes*, albeit passive citizens; and they also found themselves allegorically welcomed into the iconography of the new order. When war was declared in 1792, there were multiple responses by women: emotive, visceral, and practical.

Events such as the Women’s March to Versailles, debates on women’s rights, the granting of divorce, political clubs open to women, and recognition of women’s contributions to the revolution all projected openness to many forms of citizenship. Therefore, when the Legislative Assembly declared *la Patrie en danger*, women turned over their valuables to the government and

pledged their linens, brothers, sons, husbands, and lovers. Some, like Claire Lacombe, went before the Assembly to offer “the strength of her arms and her courage to massacre the tyrants.”⁷ Other well-known militant women requested the right to form a national guard to protect themselves as citizens and to protect their home places.⁸ From the Hôtel de Ville section of Paris came a demand from seventy-six citizenesses to be allowed to arm themselves. While they did not intend to march to the frontier, they intended to protect the capital should they be needed. They would bear arms and protect the country as Jeanne Darc (Joan of Arc) had done.⁹ Records of the assembly noted a brief discussion, followed by the decision that no law prohibited women from taking up arms.

Women did, in fact, take up arms to fight in the revolutionary (and sometimes counter-revolutionary armies). Holdings today in the Service historique de l’Armée de Terre at Vincennes are scarce because these women were not officers: they were not rank; they were the file of the military. Nonetheless records of over eighty women have survived, beginning in the

years 1792 through 1794. No one will ever know the scale of women’s employment as *soldats* during the revolutionary and Napoleonic years, but it is important historically to recognize their existence.

From March through October 1792, twenty-six women can be documented as serving in the French military, several of whom had volunteered prior to March 1792.¹⁰ From the summer of 1792 forward, laws governing enlistment were broadened, and requirements concerning basic training were relaxed. Furthermore, laws concerning minimum height and age were suspended.¹¹ Framed to include more males in the call to arms, the changes in the code benefitted women as well. A woman no longer needed to hide her sex, pretending to be a “boy” in a man’s uniform. Issues of cross-dressing, which had occasionally come into play in the pre-revolutionary armies, were no longer salient.¹² Furthermore, the well-known presence of vast numbers of women in the army train provided

⁷ Among the many petitions is the “Adresse de la section du Mail à l’Assemblée Législative, constatant que les citoyennes de cette section viennent présenter leurs frères, leurs enfants, leurs époux...” Archives nationales (AN) C 167; Bibliothèque nationale (BN) BN 8°L³³e3x, Assemblée législative.

⁸ AN C 154 and Olwen Hufton, *Women and the limits of citizenship in the French Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992), 24-25.

⁹ *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860*, 47 (31 July 1792): 322.

¹⁰ Service historique de l’Armée de Terre, X^R48/49.

¹¹ Décret qui autorise les départements, districts et municipalités à admettre les jeunes gens de seize ans qui se présenteront pour aller servir la patrie et se rendre aux frontières, 24 July 1792, in Eugène Déprez, *Les Volontaires nationaux (1791-1793)* (Paris: Librairie militaire R. Chapelot et C^{ie}, 1908), 225.

¹² Service historique de l’Armée de Terre, Y^a507. Among the twenty dossiers of eighteenth-century pre-revolutionary women soldiers, fifteen contained evidence that the women were provided with pensions and grants when they were dismissed from service. There were no further penalties for cross-dressing or for serving in the military. Cross-dressing for purposes of espionage, however, was a serious offense.

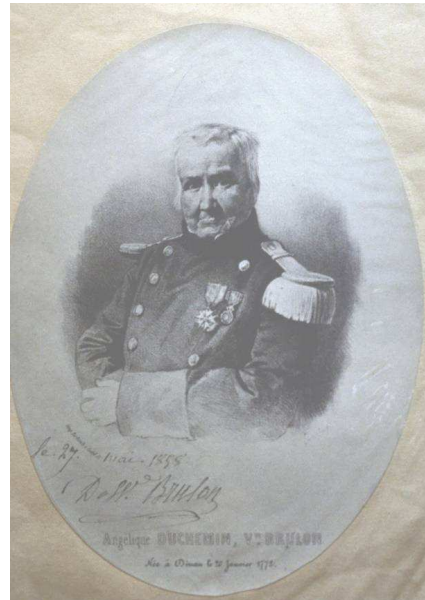
evidence that bathing, menstruation, and urination could be managed as well.

Of these earliest *femmes militaires*, most were provincial by birth like their male colleagues,¹³ although five were Parisian and one was foreign born. Twenty-two of the 26 served a year to eighteen months as volunteers, although several served far longer either later in disguise or with the collusion of their peers or commanders. Although records are scarce concerning their backgrounds, a number of women soldiers came from families with few resources, from servant families, or from the laboring poor. Several took the place of their brothers because their services were sorely needed at home. Their occupations were nearly as varied as the military itself: seven in the infantry, three in heavy artillery (cannoneers), three riflemen, and one grenadier. Of the more likely occupations for women, three were aides-de-camp, one served in transport, one was a trumpeter, another was a gendarme, and one was a sailor. Marital status varied as well. While ten were unmarried at the time of enlistment, five were married (two with

¹³ The Army of 1792 had already been transformed by the revolution. Thirty-eight percent of the common soldiers had less than one year of service and most were from rural backgrounds. Sixty-five percent were under 25 years of age. Of the male volunteers, a similar pattern exists: 69% were from the countryside and 75% were 25 years of age or younger. Soldiers were also shorter than they had been previously: 52% were under 5'6" in height, and of those, one-third were under 5'4". See Jean-Paul Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 63-70.

children), and one was a widow. Among these first women soldiers, age ranged from fifteen to forty-one, with an average of not quite 22 years of age.¹⁴

Like women soldiers who served prior to the revolution, some women enlisted to follow husbands and lovers, as romanticists would expect. Others, however, noted very different reasons for enlistment. Genevieve Prothais, a twenty-seven-year-old volunteer from Oise, joined when men ignored the call



Angelique Duchemin

to arms. Sophie Julien, who was "born with male traits" and later Angelique Duchemin, who never wore female clothing her entire life, joined because they felt more comfortable in military employ than in civilian jobs. Claudine Rouget fled from her home on the day of her marriage to an "old man." Others later cited the necessity of escaping problems at home, following the lead of their brothers or fathers, or serving as an

¹⁴ Service historique de l'Armée de Terre, X⁸48/49

example to others. Overall, however, economic motives coupled with relationships were primary motives. The military provided security of rations, long-term employment, and support for one's family.¹⁵

When the levee of 300,000 was announced in February 1793, it rekindled patriotic fervor. New petitions and pamphlets were presented to the government, and additional women joined the military. In Paris, women and children paraded before the Convention to offer whatever they might have: weapons, uniforms, and boots for the new soldiers.¹⁶ A petition allegedly from nine hundred women of Paris challenged: "You cannot refuse our request to form a battalion when you know that there are women officers and soldiers serving in the Republican Army." The petition then described how the Corps de Fernigh would be composed and what type of uniform would be supplied to volunteers. Furthermore, the rich should be forced to finance poor conscripts and volunteers, and additional employment should be opened to women.¹⁷ Ultimately no battalion of women soldiers was ever created, but common women continued to enlist.

Of the thirty more women soldiers who were documented as having enlisted in

¹⁵ Service historique de l'Armée de Terre, X^R48/49, dossiers Prothais, Julien, Duchemin, Rouget.

¹⁶ AN C 252.

¹⁷ Départ de neuf cent citoyennes de Paris qui sont enrôlées déguisées en hommes, pour partir aux frontières combattre les tyrans des nations, 1793. BN Lb⁴².2791.

1793, again the great majority came from the provinces. Many were married, and they ranged in age from sixteen to forty-seven. Into this group of women fell Thérèse Figueur, Madame Sans-Gêne, who was born in the Côte d'Or and was orphaned before her teens. Later reared by her uncle Joseph Viart, she remembered her first affinity for military pursuits when she raced to his defense against another soldier. "Following them to an asparagus field which was to be their 'champ de bataille,'" she wrote, "I wanted to seize their brandished sabers in my tiny hands." Charmed by her actions, her uncle and his challenger quickly made a truce.¹⁸ Her military record, conserved at the Service historique de l'Armée, documents service in Spain, followed by service with the 15th dragoons twice in Italy and once in the Swiss cantons. By 1799, her regiment had been evacuated from Italy. After a brief leave, she rejoined the 9th dragoons and served in Paris, Austria, Prussia, and Spain. Wounded numerous times, she was also a prisoner of war for nearly three years of her service.¹⁹

In several cases, the women soldiers of 1792 and 1793 were cited heroically in the Convention's *Recueil des actions héroïques et patriotiques* and elsewhere. Shortly it became clear, however, that some women soldiers were viewed by the government as an odd phenomenon. In essence, they were "honorary males." They were exceptions to the social and

¹⁸ Figueur, *La Vraie Madame Sans-Gêne*, 4.

¹⁹ Preface to Figueur, *La Vraie Madame Sans-Gêne*, v-xxvii; see also Service historique de l'Armée, X^R48, dossier Figueur.

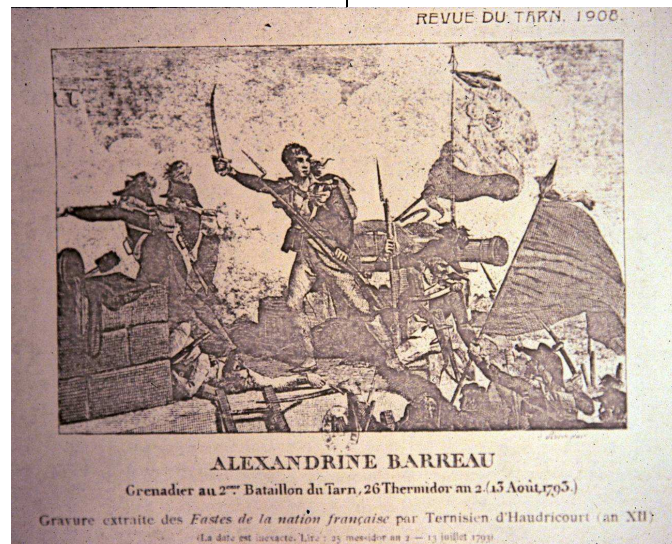
natural order, like Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc), not part of it. A transformation was taking place under Jacobin moral authority and through a reorganization of the military: the amalgamation of the line army with battalions of volunteers. The change came quickly and with little warning to women who were serving in the military. On 30 April 1793, Deputy Poultier of the War Committee reported to the National Convention that camp followers had virtually become a "second army." They were disrupting discipline, spreading diseases of the worst sort, and costing significant sums of money. The decree that followed designated women as "utile" or "inutile." In the latter category were wives of officers, women soldiers, women in supply beyond the four designated per battalion, and those who were simply traveling with the army. Women who refused could be incarcerated; recidivists

would be shorn of everything.²⁰ The few designated women who would continue to serve in supply would carry appropriate papers and marks of their employment.²¹ Interestingly, however, while the law was widely known in Paris, in the armies there was little

change. Women like Rose Barreau took the name "Liberté" in spring 1793 when she joined the 2nd battalion of the Tarn as a grenadier. Her commanding officer reported, "She showed herself to be more than a man." Twice wounded Jeanne-Marie Barère, according to her commendation, "fought with a valor well above her sex."²² Other women continued to join the military, even though the political culture of Paris was changing dramatically. The Jacobin leadership had unabashedly adopted a Rousseauist definition of the natural order, with the roles of women and men very clearly delineated.

In such a context, Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette of the Paris Commune made a new assault on women who had stepped out of the bounds that nature had assigned to them. "Should women lead our armies?" he asked. "If there

was a Joan of Arc, it was only because there was a Charles VII; if the destiny of France was placed in the hands of a woman, it was because the king did not have the head of a man and because his subjects were less than nothing."²³ There was something erotic, savage,



²⁰ Procès-verbal de la Convention nationale, 30 April 1793; *Le Moniteur*, 2 May 1793.

²¹ Emm. Martin, "Vivandières et blanchisseuses," *Carnet de la Sabretache*, 232 (April 1912), 256.

²² Service historique de l'Armée de Terre, X⁸48, dossiers Barreau and Barère.

²³ Chaumette to the Commune of Paris (27 brumaire II) in *Le Moniteur*, 17 November 1793.

unsettling, and fundamentally disorderly in a society when women took on unnatural roles. While some provincial women still joined the military, others were being removed from service. Among the better known was Marie Charpentier, who had received a certificate as a “vainqueur de la Bastille” and who had been serving in the 35th division of the Gendarmerie nationale in Paris. When her physical examination was conducted, the doctor noted: “her sex is in no way appropriate to service in the military.”²⁴ As such, she was determined not to be qualified to continue her service. Of forty-four women whose dossiers were complete enough to determine that they were serving during the period of the exclusionary decrees, nearly sixty percent of the *femmes militaires* were dismissed solely because of their sex. Some women were angry; others felt betrayed. While most received grants in aid or pensions, the government was firm; additional exclusionary decrees would continue the purging.

In the final analysis, the majority of *femmes militaires* had done nothing wrong. Yet, there were premonitions of what might occur if the gendered order was turned further on its head (i.e., that the natural role of woman would be further redefined). A woman named Saunier was denounced for incendiary proposals and for being dressed “en amazone”; another woman, dressed in male attire, was remanded to her husband, who also bore a punishment

²⁴ Service historique de l'Armée de Terre, X⁸48, dossier Charpentier.

for allowing her this moral laxity.²⁵ It was reported that “women disguised as men” volunteered in order to collect the payment of fifty sous, only to change into their female garments immediately after registration.”²⁶ If one were to ask the police, disorder was rampant.

By December of 1793, *femmes militaires* who were still serving were required to be turned over to the police for discipline; commanding officers could be stripped of their posts.²⁷ Other legislation clarified the roles of *blanchisseuses* and *vivandières*. In spite of the decrees, a handful of women (as documented) continued to serve in the military. Among them was Mme Sans-Gêne.

There are at least three lessons that come from this exercise in historical accuracy. First, Madame Sans-Gêne of the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies was indeed *la vraie* Madame Sans-Gêne. Second, the records of her military exploits, held at the Service historique de l'Armée at Vincennes, lead us to other women who chose somewhat unconventional, but not necessarily anomalous, employments in the late eighteenth century. And, they were successful, if not recognized, for what they did. Third, when Napoleon upheld Jacobin and Directorial initiatives to exclude women from the

²⁵ AN F74775¹⁴, dossier Saunier; AN BB³81^A.

²⁶ AN AF^V1479.

²⁷ Procès-verbal de la Convention nationale, 12 December 1793. Women in contravention of the law could also be subject to having their faces blackened, to being marched around the encampment in such a state, and then to being turned over to the police for discipline.

military, he did not probe too deeply (if it mattered), nor did he muster long-term women soldiers out of the military if he knew they were still enrolled, according to Figueur. He chose other avenues that women could explore under his governing authority. But, in the process, he did not stray too far from established norms. Women simply could not cross-dress, nor could they join the military.²⁸ In the end, Napoleon would not invite mesdames Sans-Gênes (*les femmes militaires*) to participate in the First Empire, and he could ignore them.

As a codicil, it is interesting, albeit troubling, to note that the current exhibits in the Musée de l'Armée at les Invalides no longer include references to women in encampments and in the army train. Perhaps it is a result of ongoing renovations. Furthermore, a recent exhibit at Versailles, titled "La guerre sans dentelles," noted that, until recently, women had not played a role in actual theatres of combat.²⁹ While some works in historical literature recognize experiences of *femmes militaires*,³⁰ Madame Sans-Gêne and her

compeers have been, and continue to be, casualties of a certain historical amnesia that pervades popular culture.³¹

Madeleine Petitjean, and the works of Emile Cère, among others.

³¹ Given the amount of research in the past several decades on women during the period of the Revolution and Napoleonic years, it is interesting that references to *femmes militaires* tend to remain tied to revolutionary rhetoric. The commentary on an earlier article of mine (1982), on which this paper is substantially based, noted: "A few years ago Richard Cobb commented that the French Revolution was the last place to look for women in public roles because they were invisible except as representations of Virtues in David's civic festivals, as a noisy claque in the assemblies, or as prophetesses of new creeds," (*Proceedings of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe*, 1982, p. 306). Where *femmes militaires* have been recognized, the published volumes have tended to be works identified with "women's history" or aspects of "social history." See, for example, Catherine Marand-Fouquet, *La femme au temps de la Révolution* (Paris: Stock/Laurence Pernoud, 1989), Dominique Godineau, "De la guerrière à la citoyenne: porter les armes pendant l'Ancien Régime et Révolution française," *CLIO: Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés* 20 (Presses universitaires du Marail, 2004), 43-69; Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La Révolution armée: les soldats-citoyens et la Révolution française* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1979), or art historian Barbara Day-Hickman's presentation "Heroines or Harlots: Women Combatants during the Revolutionary Wars" at the 2004 meeting of the Society of French Historical Studies.

²⁸ Archives de la Préfecture de la Police, D⁸58, Ordonnance concernant le travestissement des femmes (7 novembre 1800).

²⁹ *Paris Match*, 3131 (20-27 May 2009).

³⁰ See, for example, "Republican heroines: cross-dressing women in the French Revolutionary Armies," *History of European Ideas* 10, no. 3 (1989); Jeanne Bouvier, *Les femmes pendant la Révolution de 1789* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1931); Raoul Brice, *La femme et les armées de la Révolution et de l'Empire, 1792-1815* (Paris: l'Édition moderne, 1913); Fernand Gerbaux, "Les femmes soldats pendant la Révolution," *La Révolution française* 47 (1904); a series of books and articles by Léon Hennet on Rose Barreau, Mme Xaintrailles, and