

The Changing View of Charles XII of Sweden in Eighteenth-Century Europe

Scott Madere

Louisiana State University



Charles XII is an interesting subject for examining not only the influence of classical antiquity in the eighteenth century, but also for studying the influence of Enlightenment virtues as the century marched on. Was courage an enlightenment virtue? Of course. It always takes courage to step into the intellectual light. Thus, the writers discussed in this survey of references to the Swedish king - whether they were military figures or not - had some idea of courage as a great motivator of body, mind, and soul. Their commentaries on Charles and his passionate embrace of bold deeds opened a dialogue between the world of intellectuals and the world of the soldier. And their views on Charles XII's personal courage present a fascinating contrast in the early to mid-eighteenth century (1700 to 1760). Earlier writers in this century were captivated by Charles's bravery and legendary deeds, but later writers began to view Charles more critically, reflecting not only the growth of rationality among intellectuals, but also the overall growth of military analysis as the eighteenth century progressed. Importantly, as this brief survey through the decades will demonstrate, almost all of these writers used elements of classical antiquity to communicate their interpretations of Charles XII's character and actions. This framing helped the average reader understand the depth of Charles's bravery, by placing it in a familiar context. It is this ubiquitous context that forms the basis of my dissertation research, which takes a deep look at the legacies of ancient Greece and Rome in the Military Enlightenment. This short study on the *perception* of Charles XII is part of a chapter of my dissertation that examines certain figures who inspired military thought in the early eighteenth century.

Historiographically, the influence of classical antiquity on pre-Revolutionary eighteenth-century militaries has not yet been explored deeply in works related to the Military Enlightenment. Prominent historians touch on classical affinity in military thought but have not based their works solely on the concept. Gat's *A History of Military Thought* provides a starting point for discussion of the influence of classical antiquities on militaries of this period, but his objective is to demonstrate the lengthy progression of military thought from the Enlightenment to the Cold War.¹ Likewise, Lynn's *Battle: a History of Combat and Culture* recognizes the importance of classical antiquity to the development of linear tactics, but this work is focused on the long-term evolution

¹ Gat, Azar. *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001, Chapters 1-3, p. 3-56.

of war from antiquity to the present.² Pichichero's *The Military Enlightenment* mentions the influence of classical works on certain military philosophes, but her focus is exclusively on France.³ Duffy lists ancient writers familiar to the officer class of Enlightenment militaries in *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*, but his work centers on the greater topic of military service in eighteenth century Europe.⁴ Quimby's *The Background of Napoleonic Warfare* contains many references to the importance of classical antiquity to the development of Enlightenment era military theory, but keeps its emphasis on tactical developments in this period.⁵ Briant's *The First European* focuses exclusively on the reception of Alexander the Great in eighteenth century Europe, but is not exclusively a work of military history.⁶

Charles XII was a monarch that left no formal work of his own demonstrating the influence of classical antiquity on his personality or style of command. On the surface this sounds like it might be a detriment to studying the relationship of Charles XII to classical antiquity, but the opposite is true. As Starkey writes, "Charles made a powerful impression on the people of his own century, for whom he assumed symbolic importance as a military hero and as a self-destructive, tragic figure."⁷ Because he left no formal writings behind, Charles XII became a blank canvas, on which writers across eighteenth-century Europe projected their own views about politics, military thought, and what it meant to be "great." These writers compared Charles to figures from ancient Greece and Rome, and discussed the usefulness – or uselessness - of his defining trait, courage. These writings allow us to track how courage was perceived by Enlightenment writers across time, and to study the synthesis of their commentary with examples from the ancient world.

The first eighteenth-century writer to treat Charles XII as a major subject served on the staff of the Swedish king. Campaign historian Gustav Adlerfelt (1672-1709) was one of Charles's courtiers who accompanied him on the march in the Great Northern War (1700-1721). His posthumously edited and published *Military History of Charles XII* (1740) covers the early events of Charles's life, and seamlessly transitions into a field journal of Charles's campaigning from 1700-1709. Adlerfelt's account ends abruptly at the Battle of Poltava (1709), when the author was shot dead from cannon fire, not far from Charles's litter.⁸ Adlerfelt's Swedish manuscript sat unpublished for 31 years, until it was translated into French and English and published in both languages in the same year, 1740. As a record of Charles's generalship written by one of his courtiers during the king's life, it should be emphasized that this work's intended purpose was surely to present Charles in a favorable light. Adlerfeld does this. But to the courtier's credit, this lengthy account of Charles's campaigning is also surprisingly matter of fact. Adlerfelt dutifully recorded the king's courageous exploits, such as Charles personally leading his men in an

² John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, Rev. and updated ed (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2004), 125-128.

³ Christy Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment: War and Culture in the French Empire from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 25-64.

⁴ Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 52-53.

⁵ Robert S. Quimby, *The Background Of Napoleonic Warfare: The Theory Of Military Tactics In Eighteenth-Century France* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015), esp. Chapter 2, 26-80.

⁶ Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, trans. Nicholas Elliot (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), see Chapters 3 and 4, p.93-158.

⁷ Armstrong Starkey, *War in the Age of Enlightenment, 1700-1789* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 1.

⁸ Gustav Adlerfelt, *The Military History of Charles XII. King of Sweden*, 3 vols. (London: J. and P. Knapton, 1740), vol 3, 121.

amphibious landing under fire at Humelbaek (1700), but most of the writing in this work concerns the movement and disposition of troops on and off the battlefield.⁹ When Adlerfelt did opine on Charles's virtues overtly, it was the king's bravery that stood above all other qualities. In his account of the Battle of Narva (1700), for example, a day "which will always be famous in history," Adlerfelt recounted how the Russian army's general Charles Eugene de Croy could not believe "that the King of Sweden would have dared to attack an army so well entrenched and so infinitely superior to his own."¹⁰ He added,

The King signalized himself in a very extraordinary manner on this famous day, exposing himself in all places where the fire was the briskest: He received however no wound, but in the evening a ball was found in his black cravat, which had lodged there without doing him the least mischief.¹¹

Likewise, in describing the 1708 Battle of Holowczyn, Adlerfelt focused again on the king's valor, recounting how Charles always sought out the thick of the fight, encouraging his troops under fire, "animating his troops with his hand, his sword, and his voice." It was the bravery of Charles and his soldiers that won the day, according to Adlerfelt, as the Russians threw down their arms and abandoned the field.¹²

Thus ended this day so glorious both to the arms and the person of his Majesty, whose valor supported by the courage and bravery of his troops, have the Russians to understand, with what ill judgment they had compared their forces to ours.¹³

This work becomes more interesting upon its publication in 1740, after Voltaire's popular biography of Charles XII presented a more complicated view of the king, and Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* openly criticized Charles' bravery as foolishness.¹⁴ But in the time in which this campaign history was written, Charles's courage was presented as a central, positive aspect of what made him an effective commander.

1708 saw one of the first of many attempts to measure Charles XII's actions against the familiar backdrop of classical antiquity. An anonymous poem attributed to physician-turned-writer Joseph Browne titled, *The Gothick Hero. A Poem, Sacred to the Immortal Honour of Charles XII. King of Sweden, etc. The Glorious Restorer of the Protestant Religion in Silesia, from Popish Usurpation, and Arbitrary Power* appeared in London bookstores. To say that this work dedicated to Charles XII was classically inspired is an understatement. But it is also significant because it appears to make a statement about English politics as well. Browne's poem is peppered with references to a who's who of ancient literature: Hector, Achilles, Ulysses, Jove – even the Hydra is conjured for the reader's attention. These references underscore the familiarity of the

⁹ Ibid., vol 1, 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., vol 1, 57.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., vol 3, 26.

¹³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man: Being the First Book of Ethic Epistles* (London: John Wright, for Lawton Gilliver, 1734), IV, 219-222.

ancient era among the readership of the eighteenth century. Historical comparisons with Charles are also found in abundance:

The Caesars fill'd the World with Fame and Blood;
But none like Charles, with universal Good.

...

These were great Feats of Arms in elder Days,
E'er Alexander, Scipio, Caesar was:
But what were those to Wonders done of late
By Charles the Wise, the Virtuous and the Great?¹⁵

Near the end of the poem, Browne inserts another comparison between Charles XII and Alexander.

For his Ambition Alexander dearly pay'd,
And William's Councils always were betray'd;
But Charles, beyond all former Heroes Great,
In ev'ry Enterprize is fortunate.¹⁶

The irony of this verse is apparent to the modern reader who knows well that Charles's ambition was also his downfall. In fact, several writers in his own century would criticize Charles XII for that very flaw, years after the death of the king in 1718. Such is the danger of overflowing praise during the lifetime of one's poetic subject. It is this abundant praise for Charles by an English subject that gives clues to the ulterior motive of this poem: it appears to have been written in support of England's Protestant monarchy. A reprinting of this work in 1715 adds another layer to that support. The presentation of Charles as a "Gothic," i.e. Germanic, king could be construed as an association with George I, the new Hanoverian king of Great Britain (r. 1714-1727).¹⁷ Despite the likely dual meaning of this poem, the fact that Charles could draw such lofty ancient comparisons in his lifetime is significant for understanding how Europeans reacted to his actions and his valor on the battlefield. Charles's martial prowess and bravery inspired Browne and those like him.

In 1713, an English penny could buy the *Prayers for the Distressed Estate of Charles, King of Sweden, Now a Captive of Turkey* prayer book. This short publication of five prayers was intended to guide supporters of the Swedish king, who endured exile for five years in Turkey after his defeat by Peter I of Russia at the Battle of Poltava (1709). The prayers themselves seem to contain language that could apply to many situations, but a few lines indicated how Charles's most famous quality, his courage, continued to distinguish him to eighteenth-century readers, even after a major defeat. "Wherefore also we adore thy great and unspeakable Mercy, in rescuing His (Charles's) Life, when the Arrows of Death encompassed him round every side as a thick shower,

¹⁵ Joseph Browne, *The Gothick Hero. A Poem, Sacred to the Immortal Honour of Charles XII. King of Sweden, &c. The Glorious Restorer of the Protestant Religion in Silesia, from Popish Usurpation, and Arbitrary Power* (London: printed, and sold by B. Bragge in Pater-Noster-Row, 1708), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ Katarzyna Kozak, "Joseph Browne: Literature and Politics in Early Eighteenth Century England," *Anglica: An International Journal of English Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 42-43.

that so it might be wholly for the future devoted unto Thee and they Service,” the prayers read.¹⁸ The book calls for God to “Look down from Heaven... on the State of thy Servant whom thou calledst forth out of the North to fulfill thy pleasure, and didst once singularly adorn with Victory and Renown above all the Princes of the Earth, scattering His Enemies as the Dust before Him...”¹⁹ Even in prayer, the supporters of Charles XII were guided to acknowledge the martial achievement of the “Lion of the North.”

Charles was not universally adored in Britain, however. Where Joseph Browne’s poetry left its politics up to interpretation, the song *The Hero in Blue* (meaning Charles XII) could not be more overt in its positioning. Subtitled, “A New Song for the Tories to Put a Tune to, etc.,” this short 1717 lyric sheet skewers Charles, and by extension, royalists. Here, Charles is described as “the bold man that sleeps in his boots...”

That lies upon straw and that feeds upon roots,
And at random he prays, makes invasions and shoots.

The lyrics chide Charles for warmongering, teasing the king that his religion consists of “trumpets and drums,” the “storming of castles and heaving of bombs.” The song concludes with the notion that the Swedish king should be institutionalized for his lust for war, only eight years removed from a defeat that sent him scurrying into exile.

And since none can imagine what Charles intends,
If we catch him in Bedlam, we put him Apprentice,
For what should we do, with one *non Compos mentis* (sic),
As this mad Hero in Blue.²⁰

The conversation on English politics via Charles XII continued in that same year, 1717, as an anonymous author published a short history of Charles that covered his military career until 1714. *A Short View of the Conduct of the King of Sweden* opens with blistering language, spitting fire at the very notion of criticizing royalty like Charles XII.

The King of Sweden is now the general subject of discourse, whose name is not only prostituted to the Pen of every pitiful Scribler, but profan’d by being in the Mouths of the Commonest of People: A Hero who makes such a Superior Figure on the present Stage of Action, and who (were we to run the Parallel) might vie with the Caesars and Alexanders of ancient Story, is now become the Topick of Censure and Reflection to a People, whose peculiar Character is, to depress Princes to the common Level of Mankind, and to make no Distinction between Kings and Beggars.²¹

¹⁸ *Prayers for the Distressed Estate of Charles, King of Sweden, Now a Captive in Turkey*. London: Printed for John Morphew near Stationers Hall, 1713, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *The Hero in Blue. A New Song for the Tories to Put a Tune to, &c.* (London: Printed for J. Harrison, 1717).

²¹ *A Short View of the Conduct of the King of Sweden* (London: printed, and sold by A. Dodd, at the Peacock without Temple-Bar, 1717), 4.

Once again, we see the comparison of Charles XII with Alexander, and also Caesar. While the anonymous author of this history writes about Charles, they also have much to say about Alexander and Caesar as well. The author states very strongly that Charles XII is a ruler whose name should not emanate from the mouths of common people, and who is a “superior” figure in the present day. To the author, princes are on a higher level than the rest of mankind, and Charles, an extraordinary prince, “might” vie with Caesar and Alexander. Whether intentionally or not, the author of this work reveals the prestige of these two figures from antiquity in his mind and in the thoughts of those who share his point of view. To them, Caesar and Alexander are a level above the highest summit of human order in eighteenth-century Europe. The author described Charles XII as a man born with an “indefeatable hereditary right to their kingdom, and a power that is answerable to none other but the Supreme.”²² The author also suggested that Charles possessed a divine favor in battle, that “Heaven” designed on the day of the Battle of Narva to “encircle the brows of the Young Prince with immortal laurels,” by providing favorable weather.²³ But it was bravery that stands out in the narrative most. The victory at Narva was an “achievement worthy to immortalize the memory of the most experienced Captain,” and “the King of Sweden exposed himself to the most apparent dangers.” His horse was shot out from under him by a cannon ball, the author writes, but he quickly mounted another. “And by his example encouraged his men.”²⁴ Throughout the 40-page history, the author takes care to mention the many times Charles was in the thick of the fight, and concludes that “all the world” shares the same opinion of the “valor and bravery of his Swedish majesty.”²⁵ In the view of this anonymous author, courage was a trait that affirmed Charles’s position among the great captains of antiquity. To mock or criticize such a thing was reprehensible.

In 1720, just two years after the death of Charles XII, Daniel Defoe (c.1660–1731) published a continuation of his *History of the Wars of Charles XII*, originally published in 1715.²⁶ On the title page, the author’s credit goes to “A Scots Gentleman in the Swedish Service,” which meant that Defoe wrote this account through a pseudo-persona that fictitiously participated in the Great Northern War. Defoe was another writer who compared the “Lion of the North” to Alexander the Great. This was a natural comparison, considering Charles’s hard-charging reputation and other various similarities to the Macedonian emperor. Much like Alexander, Charles was thrust into power at an early age (15) and spent most of his comparatively short rule at war, mostly in foreign lands. Defoe and other commentators noted the way Charles succeeded on the battlefield against numerically superior opponents and marveled at his personal bravery, similar to Alexander. Defoe’s Scotsman speaks favorably of Charles XII and his narration glows with praise for the Swedish king in certain parts. Defoe asserted that the first year of the Great Northern War, for example, was “the most glorious year of victory that ever a king of eighteen years was blessed with in the world.”²⁷ Defoe introduced a comparison of Charles with not only Alexander but Julius Caesar as well in his description of the Battle of Narva, when Charles and his Swedish forces scattered a much larger Russian army besieging that city. Defoe wrote that Charles personified the

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Ibid., 40.

²⁶ The authorship of this work is disputed in Furbank, P. N., and W. R. Owens. “What if Defoe did not Write the ‘History of the Wars of Charles XII?’” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 80, no. 3 (1986): 333–47. Traditionally, biographers of Defoe have attributed this work to him.

²⁷ Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Wars: Of His Late Majesty Charles XII, King of Sweden, from His First Landing in Denmark, to His Return from Turkey to Pomerania* (London: H.P., 1720), 41.

meaning of Caesar's *Veni Vidi Vici*, and used hyperbole to inflate the numbers of Russians opposing Charles at the Battle of Narva. By doing so, he compared Charles favorably with the perpetually-outnumbered Alexander, a figure whose military record would have already been familiar to British readers.²⁸ So an association of Charles XII with the legendary bravery of Alexander grew the legend of the "Swedish Meteor." Defoe and the ancient biographers of Alexander even used the same literary tactics to propagate the fame of their subjects. They inflated the numbers of their subject's enemies to show the reader the extent of their powerful courage and battlefield skill. Here, in 1720, Defoe presented this impetuous bravery and command ability as highly desired traits of a general, stating that Julius Caesar himself could not have been as genuine a conqueror as Charles.²⁹

Next to the press was military theorist Jean Charles, Chevalier de Folard (1669-1752), who compared Charles and Alexander in his *Histoire de Polybe* (1727). In his comments on military science in the work, Folard painted a glowing portrait of Charles as a commander whose personal virtue and élan exceeded that of Alexander. In doing so, he placed the Swedish king among the most admirable of all commanders in history.³⁰ Unlike Defoe, Folard actually served under Charles XII in the Great Northern War. But similar to Defoe, Folard's assessment of Charles's command ability and style was passionate. On two occasions in *Histoire de Polybe*, the French officer used Alexander as a measuring stick by which he judged Charles. In Folard's chapter "On the passage of rivers," Folard stated his position clearly: "I am convinced that Charles XII. King of Sweden is comparable to Alexander the Great, if he does not surpass him by his actions, by his virtues, by his valor and by his great qualities for war."³¹ Folard's reasoning was that despite Charles's mistakes, he faced greater challenges and resistance than Alexander did in his campaigns against "effeminate" Persians and Indians, and that Alexander was no more outnumbered in his battles than Charles was.³² Citing Charles's numerical disadvantage at the 1709 Battle of Poltava (approximately 42,000 Russians to 16,500 Swedes), Folard blamed Charles's defeat to being "overwhelmed by numbers" at a disproportion "hardly conceivable." He claimed that never had Alexander found himself in such a great circle of almost insurmountable difficulty as Charles on this occasion. To Folard, Alexander revealed a more comprehensive view of the art of war than Alexander, adding, frankly, that "Alexander doesn't seem as great to me as fame advertises him."³³

Folard also called Charles's river crossing at the Battle of Holowczyn (1708) "well worth that of the Granicus," where Alexander the Great defeated a combined army of Persian cavalry and Greek mercenary infantry at a river crossing in Asia Minor in 334 BCE. At Holowczyn, Charles's 12,500-man army overcame a Russian force of more than 20,000 that was protected by marshy terrain and the Vabich River. Charles personally led a crossing of the Vabich in the early morning hours of July 4, 1708. The Swedes used leather pontoon bridges and fascines to cross the Vabich and surprise the Russians, who woke to see their protective marsh was overrun by Charles's troops. After a period of intense fighting, Charles's army dislodged the Russians from their

²⁸ Plutarch's *Lives* was a popular work in English, published no less than twenty times in London, Dublin, and New York by the end of the eighteenth century.

²⁹ Defoe, *The History of the Wars: Of His Late Majesty Charles XII, King of Sweden*, 42.

³⁰ Jean Charles Chevalier de Folard, *Histoire de Polybe, avec un commentaire ou un corps de science militaire, enrichi de notes critiques et historiques, ou toutes les grandes parties de la guerre, soit pour l'offensive, soit pour la défensive, sont expliquées, démontrées, et représentées en figures*, (Amsterdam, 1730), IV, 132.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

defenses, killing more than 1,600 men. Folard wrote that one only has to compare the passage of the Granicus to this one, to judge which of the ancient or the modern is more worthy of being sung, implying of course that Charles exceeded Alexander.³⁴ Folard added that the crossing of rivers was routine in the life of the King of Sweden, who was always exposed to the greatest dangers at the head of his army, much like the ancients wrote of Alexander.³⁵

Folard's exploration of Charles XII's battles against that of Alexander goes deeper as his work progresses. In comparing the two leaders, Folard revealed some of the specific traits that he saw as necessary for a general to deserve heroic praise. Not only must the general be strategically gifted, but he must also be extraordinarily brave and amongst his troops in the thick of the fight. He must encounter great challenges to test himself and inspire others with his courage. To Folard, Charles was a general who used a full set of resources that drew from the mind and the heart when it came to leading his troops. In the second of his two comparisons of Alexander and Charles in *Histoire de Polybe*, Folard focused on Charles's versatility, using the 1713 skirmish at Bender (Moldavia) as the setting, when Charles's camp was attacked by Ottoman forces in an attempt to remove the Swedish king from their territory. The seven-hour fight was marked by intense hand-to-hand combat in defense of the house that Charles had established as his headquarters, and ended with Charles's capture. Here, Folard downplayed the extent of Alexander's conquests in favor of the quality and depth of virtue displayed by Charles, as he personally defended his place of command.³⁶

Folard went so far as to write that if Charles's feats in Europe were examined alongside those of Alexander in Asia, that the Macedonian's reputation would "diminish infinitely," alongside that of a commander that "committed the fewest mistakes and who has given the greatest measures of courage and patience."³⁷ Folard went further to state that casual, non-military readers praised Alexander only because they were conditioned to do so, as a form of ignorant custom. Military men, like himself, he wrote, were more qualified to judge the comparison of Alexander and Charles, using specialized knowledge.³⁸

Folard made an effort here to emphasize that complacency of thought should be disregarded when comparing commanders across time. He trusted that military minds would have the capacity of reason to identify Charles's more complete military record and agree with his judgment. In his two comparisons of Alexander and Charles, Folard not only invited the reader to examine ancient and modern historical records, but he also asked the reader to disregard tradition and intellectual inertia. Folard suggested that the reader should look at the facts, and make a decision based on reason. Whether Folard was right or biased in his comparison is not as important as his suggestion that the two men should be judged on the whole of their military experience rather than reputation. Though he was clearly a personal admirer of Charles's valor, Folard, a military man, was also clearly in favor of the process of reason, the key virtue of enlightenment.

Four years after Folard's *Histoire de Polybe*, Voltaire (1694-1778) published *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731), introducing the reader to a few of the particular classical elements that may have inspired the Swedish king, but also offering rather poignant comments about Charles in this and later writings. Unlike Defoe's history of Charles's campaigns and Folard's comments on

³⁴ Ibid., 133.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 351.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Charles's value to military science, Voltaire's history of Charles XII is a biography, which spends time on Charles's education and reading preferences as a child. Voltaire mentioned on several occasions in this work that Charles read and spoke Latin fluently, initially resisting the language in his youth, but coming to appreciate it after learning that the kings of Denmark and Poland understood it. As soon as Charles learned to read Latin, Voltaire wrote, he "took a liking" to Quintus Curtius's *History of Alexander*, appreciating the subject rather than the style. This led to an anecdote:

The tutor who explained this author to him asked him what he thought of Alexander. "I think," said the Prince, "that I would like to be like him." "But," was the answer, "he only lived thirty-two years." "Ah!" replied the Prince, "and is not that long enough when one has subdued kingdoms?"³⁹

Voltaire wrote that upon becoming king at the age of 15, Charles imitated Alexander and Caesar "as ideals" in "everything but their vices," assuming a Spartan lifestyle that "renounced all magnificence, pastimes and recreations, and reduced his menu to the utmost frugality." Even women failed to tempt the young prince, Voltaire reported. "...it is certain that he abstained from the society of women for ever after, not only to avoid coming too much under their influence, but that he might prove to his soldiers his determination to live under the severest discipline."⁴⁰ Voltaire described Charles in his early years of campaigning, before he tasted defeat at Poltava, as a young man with seemingly no limit to his potential. Voltaire wrote that nothing seemed impossible to Charles, who contemplated following the footsteps of Alexander into Egypt and Asia. He described Charles as daring as Alexander at a comparable age, and in greater control of his temperament. Charles's troops, he continued, were perhaps even better than the Macedonians themselves.⁴¹ Voltaire also portrayed Charles as having little interest in the ways of society, as his whole life was dedicated to warfare. He noted that prior to his years in Turkey, Charles "had never read anything but Caesar's *Commentaries* and the *History of Alexander*."⁴²

It would seem so far that Voltaire associated Charles with Alexander (and to a lesser extent Caesar) in a way that glorified his martial talent and lifestyle. But Voltaire's writings about Charles XII furthered a discussion about the Swedish king and Alexander that would only grow over time: the debate about what it means to be "great."⁴³ Voltaire clearly preferred great thinkers and builders to great conquerors, and his later comments on Charles XII reflected that preference. Briant quotes a 1738 letter in which Voltaire described Charles as "What the common man of all eras calls a hero, (one who) is hungry for carnage, (while the) legislating, founding, and warrior monarch is the true great man, and the great man is above the hero."⁴⁴ When directly comparing Charles with his nemesis, Peter the Great, Voltaire wrote that Peter stood out from Charles because of his civic works, and that "This tsar, born with little valor, fought battles, saw many a man killed at his side,

³⁹ Voltaire, *Voltaire's History of Charles XII, King of Sweden*, trans. Winifred Todhunter (London: J.M. Dent, 1912), 12. <http://archive.org/details/voltareshistory00volutoft>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 334.

⁴³ Starkey, *War in the Age of Enlightenment*, 3.

⁴⁴ Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, trans. Nicholas Elliot (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 102.

and personally vanquished the most powerful man on earth.”⁴⁵ Voltaire closed his book emphasizing that “great” leaders like Peter and Alexander became great for what they did beyond the battlefield, and for that reason, Charles could not join their exclusive company. He opined, “(Charles) was an extraordinary rather than a great man, and rather to be imitated than admired. But his life may be a lesson to kings and teach them that a peaceful and happy reign is more desirable than so much glory.”⁴⁶

By the 1730s, the powerful instincts and emotions that governed Charles XII during his adventurous life began to receive more scrutiny and disfavor - perhaps a sign of the growing appeal of enlightened reason and virtue. The Swedish king’s courage and hotheadedness, once perceived as positive trait similar to that of Alexander the Great, drew a negative comparison with the Macedonian in a short 1732 essay called *Of Anger, Envy, and Malice*, printed in both the *Universal Spectator* and the *London Magazine: or Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer*. The anonymous essayist labeled anger and lust as the two most harmful emotions of the human mind, with anger defined as “a sudden inflammation of the mind, arising from the resentment of some ill done or intended.”⁴⁷ The essayist listed a series of episodes from the ancient world in which anger, malice, wrath, or revenge played an infamous role, including Hannibal’s alleged oath-sworn hatred of Rome, the blood feud between Marius and Sulla near the end of the Roman Republic, and the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. But the “most horrid acts,” the essayist wrote, “have been executed in the heat of blood, to assuage a storm of wrath,” noting that Alexander’s slaying of his veteran commander Cleitus in a fit of anger “blasted” all the laurels won in battle over his career.⁴⁸ The essayist, keen to illustrate his point with a modern example among his ancient anecdotes, chose Charles XII’s 1707 execution of diplomat Johann Patkul for treason as an example of the “hateful qualities of malice and revenge (that) leave an odium on the memory of princes.”⁴⁹

Just three years after the publication of Voltaire’s popular work, Charles XII became the target of the first of two great English poets who had criticisms of the long-dead Swedish monarch, indicating a more distinct turn toward viewing Charles’s chief virtues in a suspicious light. It was Alexander Pope (1688-1744), who mentioned Charles as “the Suede” in Epistle IV of *An Essay on Man* (1734), a work based on the folly of human pride and the arrogant desire of mankind to elevate itself to the center of the universe.⁵⁰ Epistle IV in particular leans heavily into a satirical spirit, focused on the instability of the public world and the misleading nature of concepts like fame.⁵¹ Here, Pope ruminates on the concept of greatness, attributing its nature to either heroes or those blessed with extraordinary wisdom. Once again, Alexander the Great and Charles are lumped together in the continuing discussion of greatness itself.

Look next on *Greatness*, say where Greatness lies?
"Where, but among the Heroes, and the Wise?"
Heroes are much the same, the point's agreed,
From Macedonia's Madman to the Suede;

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Voltaire, *Voltaire’s History of Charles XII, King of Sweden*, 334.

⁴⁷ “Of Anger, Envy, and Malice,” in *The London Magazine: Or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* (London: Charles Ackers in St. John’s Street, for John Wilford, 1732), 283.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 284.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 285

⁵⁰ Paul Baines, *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (Taylor & Francis Ltd. Books, 2000), 83.

⁵¹ Ibid., 91.

The whole strange purpose of their lives, to find
Or make, an Enemy of all Mankind:
Not one looks backward, onward still he goes,
Yet ne'er looks forward, further than his nose.⁵²

It is notable that Pope defines the purpose of the conquering hero's life as "strange," and short-sighted in the year 1734. He makes clear the immorality of aggression in his place and time, and goes a step further, mocking military bravery as foolishness.

But grant that those can *conquer*, these can *cheat*,
Tis phrase absurd to call a Villain *great*.
Who wickedly is wise, or madly brave,
Is but *the more* a fool, *the more* a knave.⁵³

In 1748, Charles XII could not escape the criticism of a second English poet, the lexicographer and literary giant, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), who used the Swedish king as a focal point of his poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Johnson's commentary in this renowned work centers how human pride and ambition runs counter to the divine plan for a virtuous life. Based on the widespread affinity for classical literature in Europe's eighteenth century, it is unsurprising that Johnson imitated the style of Juvenal's *Satire X*, which focused on themes related to virtuous living in the late first century Roman Empire.⁵⁴ Johnson made his inspiration explicit by subtitled *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, "The Tenth Satire of Juvenal Imitated." By connecting Juvenal's tenth satire with his poem, Johnson established an allegorical link between his poem's central character, and Juvenal's examples of overly-aggressive generals in his work—Hannibal, Alexander, and Xerxes. Juvenal chided these three for their relentless "thirst for glory than for virtue," which was ultimately rewarded only with death and defeat.⁵⁵ For example, note the particular language Juvenal employed to describe Hannibal's bloodlust, suggesting that possession of Italy alone was not enough to satisfy the Carthaginian's lust for destruction:

Nought is accomplished," he cries, "until my Punic host breaks down the city gates
and I plant my standard in the midst of the Subura!⁵⁶

Johnson treated Charles XII similarly. His description of Charles's aggression closely resembled Juvenal's treatment of Hannibal:

Think nothing gain'd," he cries, "till nought remain,
On Moscow's walls till Gothic standards fly,

⁵² Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, IV, 207-214.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, IV, 219-222.

⁵⁴ Howard D. Weinbrot, "Johnson's Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 46.

⁵⁵ Juvenal, *Satire X* in *Juvenal and Persius. With an English Translation by G.G. Ramsay* (London Heinemann, 1920), 203, lines 154-56.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

And all are mine beneath the polar sky.⁵⁷

Johnson mirrored Juvenal's language again as he suggested that Charles's defeat, exile, and ignominious death at Fredriksten (1718) resembled that of Juvenal's Hannibal, also defeated, exiled, and brought to an ignoble end. Juvenal wrote that Hannibal's destiny was to serve as an object of caution and ridicule:

What then was his end? Alas for glory! A conquered man, he flees headlong into exile, and there he sits, a mighty and marvelous suppliant, in the King's antechamber, until it please his Bithynian Majesty to awake! No sword, no stone, no javelin shall end the life which once wrought havoc upon the world: that little ring (poison) shall avenge Cannae and all those seas of blood. On! On! Thou madman, and race over the wintry Alps, that thou mayest be the delight of schoolboys and supply declaimers with a theme!⁵⁸

Johnson, similarly, implies that Charles's life was reduced to a moral warning after his exile and death at a "petty" siege:

The vanquish'd hero leaves his broken bands,
And shews his miseries in distant lands;
Condemn'd a needy supplicant to wait,
While ladies interpose, and slaves debate.
But did not Chance at length her error mend?
Did no subverted empire mark his end?
Did rival monarchs give the fatal wound?
Or hostile millions press him to the ground?
His fall was destin'd to a barren strand,
A petty fortress, and a dubious hand;
He left the name, at which the world grew pale,
To point a moral, or adorn a tale.⁵⁹

The difference between the two poets is that Juvenal writes with a vengeful tone, glorifying Rome's ultimate victory over its most feared and bitter archenemy. Johnson's approach is less cruel, more sympathetic, and acknowledging of Charles's weaknesses in relation to humanity's failings as a whole.⁶⁰ Johnson's poetic portrait of Charles, delivered in the framework of ancient literature, facilitated the transformation of Charles's military adventurism into that of immoral warmongering by the mid-eighteenth century. It would not be the last work advising readers to view Charles's military life as a cautionary tale.

Even biographies of Charles's enemies could not resist commenting on the fatal consequences of the warrior king's passion for violence. In John Mottley's (1692-1750) 1739

⁵⁷ Samuel Johnson, "The Vanity of Human Wishes. The Tenth Satire of Juvenal, Imitated.," in *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes. By Several Hands*, vol. 4 (London: J. Hughes, for R. and J Dodsley, 1758), 152-66, lines 200-202.

⁵⁸ Juvenal, *Satire X, Juvenal and Persius*, 205, lines 158-67.

⁵⁹ Johnson, "The Vanity of Human Wishes," lines 209-220.

⁶⁰ Weinbrot, "Johnson's Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, 48.

biography of Peter I of Russia, Mottley describes Charles's gruesome death at Fredriksten, and draws a conclusion to the king's life and career:

Thus ended in the thirty-sixth year of his age, the rapid course of that most extraordinary prince, Charles XII.... Patience of labor, temperance in living, modesty in success, and liberality to his friends were virtues he possessed in the highest degree, but his rashness and obstinacy were failings that cost his own country as much, or more, than his enemies. If he had been more prudent and less implacable, he might not perhaps have been cut off in the flower of his age, but have lived a happy, as well as a glorious monarch.⁶¹

Criticism of Charles took on a more logical framework with Montesquieu's (1689-1755) analysis in his tenth book of *Spirit of Laws*. But once again, classical antiquity continued to serve as the context from which Charles's story was summarized. In *Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu wrote consecutive chapters on Charles XII and Alexander the Great, this time emphasizing further the contrast between the two conquering rulers that Voltaire had started. Montesquieu could not have been more direct. In 1748, Montesquieu did not associate Charles with the greatness of Alexander as Folard did in 1727. Rather, Montesquieu leveled withering criticism aimed at Charles's lack of military logic.

This prince, who depended entirely on his own strength, hastened his ruin by forming designs that could never be executed but by a long war; a thing which his kingdom was unable to support.

It was not a declining state he undertook to subvert, but a rising empire. The Russians made use of the war he waged against them, as of a military school. Every defeat brought them nearer to victory; and, losing abroad, they learnt to defend themselves at home.⁶²

According to Montesquieu, Charles failed because in his quest to destroy Peter's ascendant Russia he failed to place the needs of his own country and army first. As Montesquieu described, when Charles wandered through eastern Europe, so did Sweden, like a river "cut off at the fountain-head, in order to change its course." With stinging insight, Montesquieu suggested that if Charles had not been stopped by Peter at Poltava, he would have been destroyed elsewhere.⁶³ This was because Charles's impulsive nature incited events and conditions that repeated themselves. Montesquieu suggested that lack of direction and lack of supply were indeed those continual issues for Charles when he discussed Alexander's successes in the lines that followed. As Montesquieu transitioned away from his discussion of Charles to his examination of Alexander, he wrote:

⁶¹ John Mottley, *The History of the Life of Peter I. Emperor of Russia*, vol. 3 (London: printed for J. Read, in White-Fryars, 1739), 142.

⁶² Charles Louis de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu, "The Spirit of Laws," in *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (London: T. Evans, 1777), X.XIII.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

He (Charles) was not directed by the present situation of things, but by a kind of plan of his forming; and even this he followed very ill. He was not an Alexander; but he would have made an excellent soldier under that monarch.⁶⁴

Montesquieu believed that Alexander succeeded because unlike Charles, his plans “were prudently concerted.” Alexander, head of a united Greece, chose as his enemy “an empire, abounding with every conveniency of life, furnish(ing) the enemy with all necessary means of subsisting.” Alexander’s Asian conquest was a project “not only wise, but wisely executed,”⁶⁵ unlike Charles’s invasion of Russia. What should not be overlooked here is that Montesquieu criticized Charles XII for his rash nature and bravado, the very thing that earlier writers in the eighteenth century like Defoe and Folard praised. Here, Montesquieu suggested that more forethought was required from an Enlightened leader, and he used Alexander, the same vehicle that earlier writers used to praise Charles, to frame his criticism. Not only did the perception of Charles change over time, but the perception of Alexander apparently did as well. Charles’s ferocity, once a source of inspiration, became a topic of criticism, while Alexander the Great’s wisdom became more appreciated in an age of empire.

Another “Great,” Frederick II of Prussia (1712–1786) continued this trend as he also did not hold back in his assessment of Charles’s strengths and weaknesses, and like the writers before him, he too used Alexander to contextualize his commentary on Charles XII. Frederick began by contradicting Folard’s portrait of Charles as a commander who had encountered and mastered all the facets of military life. The Prussian king suggested that Charles could be forgiven for “not having united in him all the perfections of military art,” noting that “all those who commanded armies in their early youth,” like Pyrrhus and the great Condé, “believed that all art was to be reckless and valiant.” He commented further that the nature of gunpowder warfare discounted the “main merit of the ancient heroes (strength),” and that now “cunning prevails over violence and art over valor.” “Wisdom,” Frederick wrote, “prepared the way for courage.”⁶⁶ Calling to mind the anecdote mentioned by his friend Voltaire, Frederick wrote that Quintus Curtius might have been a fun read for the young Swedish prince, but while “this book may have inspired our hero to imitate Alexander... it could not teach him the rules that the system of modern warfare provides for success.”⁶⁷ In these opening paragraphs of his reflection on Charles XII, Frederick demonstrated the evolution of military thought by 1760, when Frederick penned his thoughts on Charles in the middle of the Seven Years War. To Frederick, war was systematic. Its rules for success could be categorized and taught.

Frederick praised Charles for his early success, comparing his 1700 relief of allied Holstein-Gottorp and his subsequent victory at the Battle of Narva to Scipio’s victories in the Second Punic War. “Caesar’s *veni, vidi, vici* can be applied to this expedition,” he wrote.⁶⁸ But did Charles’s valor and early success spoil him when he should have been relying on his technical knowledge of warfare? Frederick speculated this may have been the case, noting that “his valor, although admirable, often led him only to be reckless.”⁶⁹ According to Frederick, it was this lack

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Frederick II of Prussia, “*Reflexions sur les talents militaires et sur le caractere de Charles XII (1760)*,” in *Œuvres de Frédéric Le Grand*, ed. Johann de Preuss, vol. 7, 30 vols. (Berlin: Decker, 1846), 83.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 84-85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 85.

of attention to detail that led to his defeat in later years as he campaigned against Russia, beset with supply problems.

In Fredrick's ultimate judgement, Charles was "more valiant than skillful, more active than prudent, more subordinate to his passions than attached to his real interests; as daring but less cunning than Hannibal; resembling Pyrrhus rather than Alexander..."⁷⁰ In 1760 Frederick and Prussia had just suffered some of the bloodiest campaigns of the Seven Years' War. If any commander could recognize the Pyrrhic style of warfare, it was certainly the Prussian king.⁷¹ Knowing that future military leaders would study Charles's campaigns and be seduced by the Swedish monarch's indefatigable personal courage, Frederick warned against the dangers of reading of Charles too young. "The more he dazzles, the more likely he is to mislead feathery and fiery youth," he wrote. "It cannot be taught enough that valor is nothing without wisdom, and that in the long run a spirit of combination prevails over reckless daring."⁷²

In concluding his assessment of Charles, Frederick mused on the Swedish hero's legacy, and how his most prominent virtues compared to other generals of his time:

To form a perfect captain, he would have to combine the courage, the durability, the activity of Charles XII, the coup de l'œil and the policy of Marlborough, the projects, the resources, the capacity of Prince Eugene, the ruses of Luxembourg, the wisdom, the method, the circumspection of Montecuccoli, to the appropriateness of Turenne. But I believe that this beautiful phoenix will never appear.⁷³

Frederick's last lines conjured the spirit of Alexander once again in the boldest comparison with Charles yet. Here, Frederick suggested not only the origin of Charles's greatest virtue, courage, but its degeneration to foolishness in the environment of modern warfare: "It is claimed that Alexander made Charles XII. If so, Charles made Prince Edward (Charles Edward, i.e. "Bonnie Prince Charlie"). If he happens by chance to make another, he will be at most only a Don Quixote."⁷⁴

Conclusion

These comparisons of Charles XII to Alexander and other classical figures and characters are neither coordinated nor coincidental. This short survey of various types of works such as histories, social commentaries, biographies, songs, poems, prayer books, and works of military theory demonstrate that writers with diverse backgrounds all gravitated toward ancient history as a credible archive for understanding not only the environment in which they lived but also the characters from their time that captured their imagination. In this case, Charles XII and his capacity for violence and personal courage was the flashpoint for this type of reflection. It is notable that the perception of Charles's qualities changes over six decades, but the objects of comparison remain the same. Joseph

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁷¹ We should not overlook that Frederick could be using this commentary on Charles XII as a bit of self-reflection on his current situation.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Browne of London used Alexander to make his point about Charles XII all the same as Frederick II of Prussia, so many years and so many miles apart. Each writer featured in this short review of works believed not only in the credibility of ancient sources to reinforce their position on Charles XII, but they also trusted their audience to understand the reference without further explanation. This is indicative of a cultural environment across Europe in the eighteenth century that was thoroughly saturated with an affinity for classical antiquity. This environment has been illustrated since that time by many works on eighteenth century art, architecture, literature, and other areas of cultural significance. It is time for further studies on the presence and influence of classical antiquity specifically in the military realm of the eighteenth century, as military culture is not apart from, but rather a reflection of, the societies they represent.