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‘The Rose of No Man’s Land [?]’¹: Femininity, Female Identity, and Women on the Western Front

By Nancy Martin²

Abstract

This article provides an analysis of a range literary texts and memoirs written by, and about, women who served as nurses, VADs, and ambulance drivers on the Western Front. It explores how these texts represent “feminine” identity in relation to the war’s emotional and physical trauma and focuses, in particular, on moments where conventional notions are challenged, or made impossible, by the war’s chaos. In addition, this article explores how these women understood, articulated, and represented the men they sought to aid. Fundamental to this discussion is an exploration of the period’s propaganda and iconography and how these women writers attempted to negotiate an intelligible identity in relation to it. The article’s primary aim is to expose, and navigate, some of the complex sites of *ideological* battle within Britain during the First World War. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the complexity, ambiguity, and flexibility of both “femininity” and “masculinity” in the context of dramatic social change.

Keywords: First World War, Women’s Writing, Femininity and Female Identity

You are being sent to work for the Red Cross. You have to perform a task which will need your courage, your energy, your patience, your humility, your determination to overcome all difficulties [...] Sacrifices may be asked of you. Give generously and wholeheartedly, grudging nothing, but remembering that you are giving because your country needs your help...think of the men who are fighting amid discomfort and who are often in great pain. Let our mottos be ‘Willing to do anything’ and ‘The People give gladly.’ If we live up to these, the V.A.D. members will come out of this world war triumphant.

Katharine Furse, Commandant-in-Chief

By January of 1916, thousands of women across Britain had received the above sealed letter from Katharine Furse, the Commandant-in-Chief of the First World War’s Voluntary Aid Detachments.³ Its contents offered freedom and opportunity: an escape from the isolated shelter of the family home and a chance to join husbands, brothers, and lovers on the front. Indeed, with few alternative roles open to women beyond the home front, the uniform of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse was particularly appealing. The starched white dress and flowing veil,

¹ The title, *The Rose of No Man’s Land*, is a reference to the 1918 song of the same name that was written by Jack Caddigan and James Alexander Brennan as a tribute to the Red Cross nurses of the Great War.

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³ The above is an excerpt from the original ‘Paper to VAD members from Katherine Furse,’ written during the First World War. The letter in its entirety can be found at: <http://www.vlib.us/medical/tabb.htm>.

a source of pride for middle and upper-class families, offered public recognition and an active role in the nation's defense. In short, it offered *an identity*, a clearly articulated and significant role in the war. This role was represented by recruitment propaganda as "natural" for women in wartime; it effectively carried women's peacetime responsibilities of nurturance, life-giving, and self-sacrifice to the battlefield. In other words, the potentially transgressive nurse was aligned with the conservative domestic deity—the patriotic mother. The conflation of the two figures is most clearly represented in the 1918 Red Cross recruitment poster by Alonzo Earl Foringer, entitled "The Greatest Mother in the World." The image presents a large female figure, dressed in robes and gazing upwards, a red cross on her white veil. In her arms, she cradles a tiny wounded soldier. The image presents a strange rendition of the Madonna and Child—the nurse serving as the wartime "mother" to the nation's sacrificed "sons." This association effectively functioned in maintaining the nurse's wartime work (and sexuality) within the conventional idealized value system, one that equated feminine duty with maternal self-sacrifice; "Give generously and wholeheartedly, grudging nothing," wrote Furse in the letter that was "to be kept in [the] pocket book" of every VAD.

However, the strictly—and stereotypically—"feminine" contours of this government-endorsed identity could rarely be maintained beyond the home front. These genteel Edwardian ladies entered a war zone of unprecedented destruction and devastation without any knowledge of its realities. Working twelve to sixteen-hour days, surrounded by "blood and mud and vermin" (Price, 1989, p. 59), they rushed to sterilize equipment, to clean wards, and to dress the often-gruesome wounds of men. There was therefore little time or space in the overcrowded and makeshift hospitals for displays of feminine piety and propriety; romantic images of "ministering angels" were often dispelled, leaving in their place only disillusion and alienation. Evadne Price (Helen Zenna Smith), in her novel, *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*, presents this disillusion as mirroring that of the canonized combatant writers: "The pretty romance has gone. War is dirty. There's no glory in it. Vomit and blood. Look at us. We came here puffed out with patriotism. There isn't one of us who wouldn't go back tomorrow. The glory of war...my God!" (1989, p. 56). In this chaotic environment, the subjectivity of VADs was often fundamentally destabilized, fragmented like the shattered bodies of the men they served. They, like male combatants, were positioned at what Sharon Ouditt (1994) has rightly termed an "ideological junction," caught "between a traditional, idealized value system and a radical new order of experience" (p. 7). This precarious position often resulted in the *unmaking* of fundamental categories and gendered distinctions, leaving in their place an ambiguous and complex subject position that was often a source of intense anxiety (Ouditt, 1994).

The remainder of this paper will provide a detailed analysis of literary texts and memoirs written by, or about, women who worked as nurses, VADs and ambulance drivers during the First World War.⁴ It will focus, in particular, on moments of ideological breakdown, or rupture, in order to establish the complex, ambiguous, and fluid nature of both femininity and female

⁴ This study explores fiction alongside memoirs for several reasons. First, it allows for a more diverse and comprehensive examination of frontline female experience. Second, fiction is constantly woven with lived experience in each of these texts, as each of the author's experienced the war first-hand, be it as nurses, VAD's, ambulance drivers (Borden, Rathbone, Brittain, Bagnold, Dent) or war journalists (Price). Furthermore, as has been argued by Samuel Hynes, the generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are particularly difficult to define in war writing. Memoirs and diaries, which are generally written with an audience in mind, often "aim for dramatic effect as much as an absolute truth" (Hynes 11). Therefore, the "self" presented in memoir (as in fiction) must be understood as a presentation—or performance—of a complex and many-voiced subject, whose "voice" varies not only in relation to the intended audience, but also in relation dominant ideologies.

identity in wartime. It will focus on such neglected writers as Mary Borden, Enid Bagnold, Kate John Finzi, Evadne Price, Olive Dent, and Irene Rathbone, arguing that while the period's strictly polarized gender constructs were meant to unify the nation, they in fact functioned to divide and fragment the subjectivity of individuals. Mary Borden, a VAD and head of a mobile surgical unit, captures this complex subject position in her 1929 collection of "fragments," entitled *The Forbidden Zone*. While making her rounds amid the mangled bodies of men, her autobiographical speaker addresses the reader directly: "There are no men here, so why should I be a woman?" (2008, p. 43). This question articulates the war's breakdown of the fundamental categories of gender and sexual difference. Female identity is rendered irreverent as its counterpart, or "other," is reduced to parts and pieces: "heads and knees...and parts of faces...there are these *things*, but no men" (italics added p. 44). Indeed, in the midst of the war's unprecedented destruction and chaos, the boundaries between men and women, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, are often erased, therefore illuminating the socially *constructed* nature of such categories: "the same thing is throbbing in us, the single thing, the one life" (Borden, "Blind," p. 102). Through a detailed analysis of these moments of ideological breakdown I am able to explore how these women negotiated an intelligible identity located somewhere between ideology and lived experience.

I begin, however, with a brief discussion of the historical and cultural context of November 1916, at which point the VAD organization was officially granted a clear position in the war; "its uniform was established, its function on the lines of communication were highly valued and it had even gained limited government funding" (Ouditt, 1994, p.15). After two years of war and catastrophic losses, the social and political red tape that had hitherto slowed the passage of eager women to the Front had therefore finally been removed. The mobilization of womanpower was necessary and thousands enthusiastically "answered the call." Women of all ages lined up to volunteer in almost any capacity—"as hospital orderlies, as canteen workers ladling soup at railroad stations, or as clerks tracking those missing in action" (Higonnet, 2001, vii). Among the most coveted positions, however, was that of the VAD nurse, the "ministering angel" to the nation's wounded "Tommy."

As women entered not only the war zone, but the shop, the farm, and the factory, boundaries between the period's established categories—home and front, warrior and civilian, man and women—could no longer be easily maintained. As a result, government, through propaganda, worked to re-code the wartime behaviour of women in an attempt to maintain traditional social order. While an emphasis on conventional notions of separate spheres for men and for women was dominant during the first years of the war—asserting men's position on the Front as "natural," while that of women's in the home, raising the nation's future soldiers—after 1916, these images gave way to visions of sexual disorder (Kent, 1995). As thousands of women left the home and entered munitions factories, for example, donning "blue overalls" and "unbecoming jelly-bag caps" (Rathbone, 1998, p. 262), Rebecca West happily declared: "surely, never before in modern history can women have lived a life so completely parallel to that of the regular army" (quoted by Marcus, *Not So Quiet*, 1989, p. 382). However, while women like West viewed these dramatic changes as an exciting and positive step toward women's liberation, many others viewed them with intense anxiety, arguing that women's deteriorating "femininity" would inevitably lead to "immorality."

This intense anxiety was frequently articulated in sexual terms, as women's "moral behaviour," in particular, was represented as fundamental to the nation's victory. In this context, uncontrolled female sexuality, a point of concern at the war's outbreak, had now become a

national threat (Grayzel, 1999, p.122). The countless newspaper and magazine articles devoted to the disastrous potential of the “flapper” and the “amateur girl” attests to the intensity of this widespread fear. Arthur Conan Doyle, for example, equated “khaki fever” with prostitution in his 1917 article for *The Times*, describing young London women as “harpies” who “prey upon and poison our soldiers,” “carry[ing] them off...and finally inoculat[ing] them” (quoted by Bland, 1985, p. 47). The government, fearing the safety of its fighting men, reinstated elements of the Contagious Disease Acts of the 1860’s, Acts which took feminist repeal figures like Josephine Butler three decades to eliminate. Illusively titled regulation 40d of the Defense of the Realm Act, the government declared: “no woman suffering from venereal disease shall have sexual intercourse with any member of His Majesty’s Forces” (quoted by Grayzel, 1999, p. 141). The female body, therefore, “as the site of temptation and the transmitter of disease” had indeed become “an arena for the expression of anxiety about general social disorder” (p. 122).

This fear of women’s sexuality, and the threat it supposedly posed to the nation, is found filtered through not only the literary texts and memoirs of VADs, but also through the official policies and recruitment procedures of the organization itself. This is perhaps not surprising, as nurses and VADs were to be among the only women permitted into the warzone, and further, their duties required them to be in close and often intimate contact with male bodies. As a result, strict regulations were put in place in order to police the sexuality of these young women. This policing is evident, for example, in the “British Red Cross Regulations and Uniform Rules,” which consisted of eleven specific—and telling—regulations regarding female conduct. While some of the rules were undoubtedly meant to insure the organization’s professional image—which was necessary as many felt that women had no place at the Front—others are clearly devoted to the containment of female sexuality:

2. No member in uniform is allowed to walk in the streets, or in the Hospital grounds with sick or wounded officers or men.

4. Members are not to walk about arm-in-arm in uniform, or to stand with their hands in their apron, or coat pockets. [...].

7. NO LOW-NECKED BLOUSES, furs, veils, high-heeled or fancy shoes or fancy boots, fancy shoe laces or buckles, fancy stockings, colored spats...Powder, paint, and scent are not to be used.

(IWM. Misc. 36 Item 670)

Focused primarily on controlling the physical appearance of women in a virtually all-male warzone, rather than on practical—task-related—issues, these rules and regulations were meant to reinforce what was understood as fundamental to middle- and upper-class femininity: chastity.

This focus on sex reflects the society’s attempt to maintain traditional social order in the midst of a war that defied conventional habits and understandings. The traditional heterosexual terms and images of “masculine” and “feminine” behaviour were indeed “no longer adequate to the task of giving meaning to a war so completely out of line with all precedent” (Kent, 1995, p.162). This was particularly the case for men and women on the Front, where the severity of the war’s trauma often resulted in the *unmaking* of the fundamental categories of gender and sexual difference, as performance of the “proper” gender scripts became inappropriate, if not

impossible. Stripped of their conceptual (gendered) framework for understanding not only the war, but also their identity within it, men and women on the Front were left to construct new identities in the midst of the war's chaos. I turn now to an examination of the war's *troubling* of gender categories, and the implications for female subjectivity, as they are represented in the war writing of nurses, VADs and ambulance drivers who served in the First World War.

It was in the midst of the warzone, during rare and brief moments of rest, that Mary Borden, a VAD nurse and head of a mobile surgical unit, wrote the majority of her collection of "fragments" detailing her wartime experiences. She entitled the 1929 collection *The Forbidden Zone*, literally, the space located "behind the zone of fire" (preface). Its contents, depicting with vivid detail the physical suffering of wounded men and the jarring psychological torment of nursing women, is remarkable in its refusal to sanitize the war's hypocrisy and horror. Recasting the hospital as a "second battlefield" (p. 97), wherein the nurse's enemy is pain (while death is "a miracle"), Borden constantly troubles traditional conceptions of both masculinity and femininity. Indeed, in that "confused goods yard," filled with "bundles of broken human flesh" (p. 98), there is little room for such categories and distinctions. In her autobiographical short story, "Blind," for example, Borden describes the connection and *similarity* she feels with fighting men:

How crowded together we are here. How close we are in this nightmare...I've never been so close before to human beings. We are locked together, the old one's and I, and the wounded men, we are bound together. The same thing is throbbing in us, the single thing, the one life. We are one body, suffering and bleeding. (p. 155-6)

In this passage, the distinction between soldier and nurse—male and female—has been erased as a result of the war's destruction and desolation. Packed together "like sardines" in the midst of the hospital's "suffering and bleeding" the nurses and wounded soldiers are not men and women, but "human beings." Women's memoirs from the front frequently describe a powerful sense of similarity and solidarity with male combatants, providing evidence of comradeship that effectively overrode all distinctions in moments of chaos. The basis of this sense of comradeship was often connected to shared feelings of distance and alienation from the home front. In her diary, on the 6th of March 1916, Vera Brittain describes the estrangement she feels from England and those who remain "uninitiated" (*Testament*, 1978, p. 217). She describes the "uncomprehending remoteness of England from the tragic, profound freemasonry of those who accepted death together overseas" (p. 360).

This is similarly the case for Nell, the narrator of journalist, Evadne Price's (1989) text, *Not So Quiet*. Upon arriving home from the Front, Nell finds the company of those who had not experienced the war—and who still staunchly uphold its ideals—to be intolerable. The only person she is capable of speaking honestly and openly with is a soldier, Roy, whom she has known since childhood. And yet, it is not their shared past which provides the equal ground for conversation, but the war, or, more specifically, their shared experience of the war's horrific realities, realities that have fundamentally altered them both, leaving them profoundly distanced from the those who remained on the home front. "He understands, as I knew he would. Of course Roy would be the only one to understand" (p. 188). Further highlighting the significance of shared experience, and the resulting breakdown of traditional gendered conceptions, are Roy's comments to Nell: "Aren't the parents bloodthirsty? The way I've got to pretend I'm the little hero, Nell. I had a month in the trenches before I got that Blightly fracture, and I'd do anything

on god's earth rather than go back. The wires I pulled to get this base job, I can tell you. You understand? . . ." (pp. 188-9), to which Nell tellingly responds, "I understand, Roy" (p. 189).

This shared experience, and the resulting "understanding" of not only the realities of war, but of each other, inspires Nell and Roy's engagement. This union, based on equality and honesty, appears to suggest that the war's breakdown of idealized gendered categories and distinctions had potentially positive effects for male and female relationships. Having been seriously wounded in battle—and having received and *rejected* the Military Cross (MC)—Roy writes to Nell, "releasing her from her promise," as the nature of his wounds means that there "will never be any perambulator on that lawn of [theirs]" (p. 231). Nell's succinct response is significant: "Dear Roy, Don't be a silly ass. I hate kids anyway" (p. 232). This exchange presents the outright rejection of idealized masculinity and femininity: Roy rejects the Military Cross and the image of heroic masculinity it represents, while Nell rejects her role as patriotic mother. Their childless union ultimately signifies a *rewriting* of gender scripts.

The catalyst for this troubling, and, ultimate rewriting of gender scripts, appears to be the disillusion, frustration, and anxiety that resulted from the perceived "failure" to live up to home front ideals. As the utter hypocrisy and futility of such ideals became apparent to both Frontline men and women, they often sought to counter such perceptions in their writing. Price provides a particularly graphic rejection of the often-ridiculous ideals held by those at home. Imagining her mother and future mother-in-law being removed from the safety of their genteel homes and placed within the midst of her daily trauma, she demands:

Gaze on the heroes who have so nobly upheld your traditions, Mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington. Take a good look at them...The heroes you will sentimentalize over until peace is declared, and allow to starve for ever and ever, amen, afterwards. Don't go. Spare a glance for my last stretcher,...that gibbering, unbelievable, unbandaged thing, a wagging lump of raw flesh on a neck, that was a face a short time ago. [...] Who is he? For all you know, Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, he is your Roy. (pp. 94-5)

For Price's narrator, an ambulance driver, the distance between home and front, between ideology and lived experience, between mother and daughter, has become jarring and unbridgeable. Nell's intense feeling of estrangement and resentment directly parallels that which is often described in the more frequently studied writing of male combatants.

The daily trauma experienced by both nurses and soldiers appears to have completely isolated those on the front from those at home.

Furthermore, the horrific scenes Price and Borden describe, appear to suggest the effective elimination of the categories of gender and sexual difference. Indeed, in the midst of such intense emotional and physical suffering even the *physical* markings that distinguish the bodies of men and women appear to dissolve. This appears to have been the case for many women who experienced the war first-hand. In her often-cited war memoir, *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain imagines that her features are becoming more "masculine" after the war: "A dark shadow seemed to lie across my chin; was I beginning to grow a beard...?" (1978, p. 484). While this experience of the war's troubling of gender categories is frightening and even "shameful" (496) for Brittain, for Price's Nell, it is liberating. In order to distance herself from the official discourse and idealized images of femininity, she cuts off her hair: "I cannot bear the filth and

worry any longer...I get the Bug's scissors and begin to snip...not bad. Makes me look about sixteen. Something quite pleasant about the feel of short hair. Boyish" (1989, p. 147).

Nell's mental rejection of femininity has thus progressed in this scene into a physical rejection, a rejection that effectively blurs the gender distinctions that Nell's position as an ambulance driver had already worked to destabilize. For while containing the nurse and VAD within traditional conceptions of femininity was hardly taxing for propagandists—the aiding of sick and wounded men adhered to women's "natural" role as self-sacrificing and ministering saviour—aligning the female ambulance driver proved to be more difficult. Women ambulance drivers were required to drive long distances in treacherous conditions both day and night. Jane Marcus provides an apt summary of their role in war: they [were] experts in the geography of hell, driving at night with their lights off in freezing cold and snow...with their loads of screaming and moaning wounded" (*Not So Quiet*, 1989, pp. 244-45). Under such difficult conditions, these women had to be self-reliant, courageous, and brave, characteristics that were supposedly "masculine" in nature. In addition, an intimate knowledge of vehicle maintenance was also necessary. In her unpublished memoir, FANY B.B. Hutchinson, for example, describes the daily maintenance performed by female ambulance drivers: "We took [the ambulance] into our own workshop first and cleaned it until one could almost go underneath in evening dress without mishap. We oiled all bolts and nuts that could be needed, making most of them free and replacing the nuts just tight enough for the few furlong run to the depot" (IWM 74/105/1 18). The expertise of these supposedly fragile, genteel women is clear: "there was no glamour in starting up engines, but the girls said I should have been awarded a mangle handle rampant!" (p. 23). Such skill in this supposedly "masculine" profession thus serves to further trouble, or challenge, conventional gender categories and distinctions.

Mary Borden describes a similar, and more intense, blurring of sexual difference. As she makes her rounds, straightening pillows, providing water, and administering medicine (2008, p. 59) she is "no longer a woman" (p. 59):

There are no men here, so why should I be a woman? There are heads and knees and mangled testicles. There are chests with holes as big as your fist, and pulpy thighs, shapeless; and stumps where legs once were fastened. There are eyes—eyes of sick dogs, sick cats, blind eyes, eyes of delirium; and mouths that cannot articulate, and parts of faces — the nose gone, or the jaw. There are these things but no men; so how could I be a woman here and not die of it? (p. 60)

For Borden, there is no place in war for men and women, masculinity and femininity. These terms are only intelligible on the home front, where the scope of the war's devastation cannot touch the subjectivity of those men and women who still believe in "patriotic mothers," "heroic Tommies," and "sinister hun." Borden's subjectivity has been eroded, fragmented like the bodies of the men she tries to aid. Her language in this passage presents war as profoundly dehumanizing. Men are reduced to parts and pieces, or are aligned with sick animals, while women become barren shells, void of all feeling and emotion. Indeed, in this environment, Borden must refuse the traditional feminine scripts—dependency, mourning, and self-sacrifice—in order to nurse.

However, not all women who experienced the front would—or could—come to terms with the war's gender "confusion" (Borden, 2008, preface). Olive Dent's 1916 war memoir, *A VAD in France*, for example, appears to sanitize—considerably—descriptions of the war's

emotional and physical suffering. She chooses, rather, to focus on the more domestic aspects of her work, a technique that allows her to maintain some semblance of pre-war “feminine” identity. In her chapter entitled ‘Convoy In,’ for example, Dent provides a characteristically positive depiction of her “feminine” work on the ward:

It is very feminine to enjoy rising above expectations, and to hear stumbling expressions of gratitude after a dressing,—to be assured that ‘it feels luvly’ or ‘I was dreading that, sister, and it didn’t hurt a bit’—is as the sound of music in one’s ears. It is a form of vanity of which we are not ashamed, indeed, we revel in it. We try as hard to gain such compliments as any actress ever works to ‘get over’ the footlights, as hard as any *passé* professional beauty fishes for her toasts of yesteryear...” (2005, p. 22).

Her reference to the “performance” of actresses, in particular, is telling, as it appears that she must play the part of the devoted and doting nurse, who seeks compliments as would a “professional beauty” (p. 22), as opposed to the authoritative and skilled medical professional. While the latter would have the power to challenge and transgress gender norms, the former maintains traditional conceptions. Her aligning of her nursing duties with stereotypically female characteristics—vanity—functions in securing her pre-war identity. Dent’s often-neglected memoir then, serves as an apt example of one woman’s attempt to maintain her “feminine” sense of self in the midst the war’s chaos. In order to do so, however, she must maintain the other side of the binary, as femininity depends upon its differentiation from masculinity. She therefore depicts wounded soldiers not as fragmented “lump[s] of raw flesh” (Price, 1989, p. 94), but as “Heroes in their carpet slippers” and “History makers” (Table of Contents). Such titles reflect Dent’s unconscious support of official, conventional rhetoric. And yet, while Dent attempted to maintain some semblance of “femininity” in order to maintain her pre-war identity, others appear to use their war writing to make sense of—or perhaps come to terms with—their experiences of confusion and crisis. A primary source of this confusion and/or crisis was constantly found in the “war ravaged bodies of men” (Das, 2005, p. 176), bodies that bore little resemblance to home front images of “Heroic Tommies.”

Many women writers described the wounded men they encountered in ways fundamentally different from dominant conceptions. As we have seen from Borden’s text, they become shattered objects and fragmented body parts: “there are chests with holes as big as your fist and pulpy thighs, shapeless...” (2008, p. 44). Similarly, for Price’s narrator, they are “mangled *things* [she] drive[s] in the night” (italics added, Price, 1989, p. 57). Such seemingly detached descriptions were undoubtedly necessary to the continued efficiency of nurses and VADs; they functioned in separating, if only for a moment, the human being from the horrific wounds. In addition, and in stark contrast to images of soldiers as fearless “guardians and avengers,” nurses often describe them in terms usually reserved for those they are “meant to” protect. Rathbone (1988), for example, describes the relationship between soldiers and nurses as often akin to that of mother and child. Joan, her autobiographical protagonist, describes wounded men as “unable to cut up their own food” and needing to be “spoon-fed” (p. 236). Similarly, Enid Bagnold, a VAD nurse at a crowded war hospital in Woolwich, describes a seventeen-year-old “boy” who is suffering from pneumonia. After being washed by Bagnold and a Sister the young soldier weakly asks if she will “brush [his] hair?” (*A Diary Without Dates*, 1978, p. 77). In these texts masculinity is not equated with aggression, just as femininity is not equated with weakness.

Rather, male combatants are perceived as submissive and helpless, not unlike children; they must docilely accept the care and instruction of determined and assertive nurses and VADs. However, while traditional conceptions of masculinity here are fundamentally troubled, the same cannot be said for conceptions of femininity. This depiction of the nurse as a maternal figure to the wounded soldier, suggests an adherence to traditional conceptions of women's role as "patriotic mother," a role that functioned in curtailing the nurse's potential as a powerful and transgressive figure.⁵

However, while some women articulated their nursing of wounded soldiers in maternal terms, others, in stark contrast, describe a sexual coming of age. Joan, the protagonist of Rathbone's *We That Were Young* (1988), provides an apt example of the ignorance and innocence that was common—and indeed cultivated in—middle and upper-class ladies. She retrospectively describes herself as entirely ignorant about what she calls "the mysterious consummation of love," which she had, "one the whole kept resolutely from her thoughts" (p. 140). In many ways, the close and often intimate contact with men's bodies served as sexual introduction for young VADs like Rathbone. Vera Brittain, who, before the war, "had never looked upon the nude body of an adult male" (Testament, 1978, p. 165), came to recognize and appreciate the knowledge she had gained through the nursing of wounded men: "from the constant handling of their lean, muscular bodies, I came to understand the essential cleanliness, the innate nobility, of sexual love on its physical side" (p. 166). The discussion of sex and sexuality in these texts starkly contrasts with that of the home front, where female desire is depicted in fantastical terms. As we have seen, desiring women on the home front become immoral temptresses and transmitters of disease, while male sexuality is often depicted as aggressive and violent. The countless atrocity stories, for example, depicting the mutilation and violation of Belgium women by German soldiers, served as a powerful justification for the war itself. And yet, women like Brittain and Rathbone describe sex and desire in terms of awakening and initiation. Having witnessed first-hand the suffering, dependence, and vulnerability of men on the Front, they describe sexual relations in terms of comfort and giving.

And yet, while the sexual knowledge gained by women on the Front might have been viewed as inevitable, the gaining of sexual *experience* was not. As we have seen, it was certainly the hope of the VAD organization that the standard-issue uniform would serve as a constant reminder of the "necessity" of professional distance. This distance functioned as an ideological "gulf," which worked to insure that the potentially sexual nature of such close encounters remained unrecognized by nurses and wounded men. In other words, professional distance was meant—at least in part—to insure physical distance. In the light of this, the words of Furse, the Commandant-in-Chief, are, once again, telling: "Remember that the honour of the VAD organization depends on your individual conduct. It will be your duty not only to set an example of discipline and perfect steadfastness of character [again, read sexual character], but also to maintain the most courteous relations with those whom you are helping in this great struggle" ('Letter from Katharine Furse to VADs'). In order to insure that only "the most courteous relations" occurred between nursing women and wounded men, ward Sisters, or Matrons, were charged with monitoring the conduct of the VADs who worked under them. These Sisters—professionally trained nurses—are constantly described in the writing of VADs as formidable and unforgiving figures of authority. Vera Brittain describes one Matron as a "slave driver"

⁵ For a detailed discussion of women identities at war and their complex relation to discourses of motherhood, see Susan Grayzel's 1999 book, *Women's Identities At War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War*.

(*Testament*, 1978, p. 167), while, in Price's text, the Matron Commandant is consistently referred to as "Miss Bitch." Whatever their title, the seemingly constant surveillance and often-harsh critiques of these women functioned in policing the conduct of VADs, sexual and otherwise.

Enid Bagnold's 1917 diary provides an apt example of this policing. Having fallen in love with a wounded soldier, whom she anomalously titles No. II (his bed number), she is fearful of the ever-watchful Sisters:

We can't speak, No. II and I, only a whispered word or two that seems to shout itself into every ear...Last night it was stronger than I. I let him stand near me and talk. I saw the youngest Sister at the far end of the ward by the door, but I didn't move; she was watching. The moment I took my eyes from her I forgot her...This is how one feels when one is desperate; that is how trouble comes. (p. 70)

And indeed "trouble" does come. Shortly after this episode, No. II is transferred to another hospital. Bagnold enters the ward, "[thinking] of nothing but that [she] should see him," and finds him gone: "His bed was made in the fashion in which we make an empty bed, a bed that waits for a new patient...I smiled as I noticed they [the Sisters] hadn't even left me that to do" (1978, p. 72). Knowing that the young Sister had personally arranged his immediate departure in order to "protect her," she resignedly asks: "How...permanently am I in disgrace?" To which the Sister tellingly responds: "Not at all...now" (p. 73). This brief exchange is particularly significant. By falling in love with the wounded No. II, Bagnold transgressed the rigid professional boundary between nursing woman and wounded soldier. Furthermore, as piety and priority are fundamental characteristics of the "ministering angel," her brief love affair challenges the rigid contours of the nurse's ideological construction. The result is disgrace, which functions in this context as a mechanism for the control of female sexuality and desire. "Even my hand must not meet his—no, not even in a careless touch, not even if it's "duty"; or, if it does, what risk!" (p. 70). Indeed the risk was great; professional misconduct, particularly of a sexual nature, could have resulted in her termination and subsequent disgraceful return to England. The Sister's intervention, therefore, functioned in re-establishing the boundary between not only the nurse and the soldier, but also between the nurse and her ideological "other," the lover.

However, while traditional codes of professional behaviour were re-established, Bagnold's description of her brief love affair nonetheless illuminates the war's troubling of the period's codes of sexual behaviour. This troubling is a common feature of the writing of VADs and ambulance drivers. These women shared with male combatants' knowledge of the war's horrific realities, realities that served as a constant reminder of the fragility and temporality of life. As one soldier wrote in the autograph album of VAD nurse Stevens: "the soldier's reward for doing his duty [is death]"—under which he had roughly sketched a grave (IWM. Misc. 66, item 1019). Furthermore, their work required them to be in practically constant contact with the bodies of wounded men. Brittain provides a frank and succinct description of the often intimate nature of this contact: "Short of actually going to bed with them, there was hardly an intimate service that I did not perform for one or another in the course of four years" (1978, p. 66). The intimacies of this work inevitably resulted in the troubling of traditional codes of sexual behaviour.

In her unpublished memoir, B.B Hutchinson, for example, describes the newly acquired sexual freedom of female ambulance drivers, a freedom she attempts to steer towards marriage:

Being only 26 and myself and responsible for about 50 young girls in a world of men, I had a Mess Night Dance on alternate Saturday nights and insisted that “Pursuitors” were invited and introduced to me. I hoped that the background of chaperonage would turn minds to wedding rings rather than ‘nights out.’ (IWM. 74/105/1 25).

Her casual reference to ‘nights out’ in this passage reflects an acceptance of the sexual encounters between female drivers and soldiers, encounters that were evidently common enough to merit their own slang term. In an environment of absolute chaos, where one’s job is to drive wounded and suffering men—often in darkness and amid falling bombs—sexual encounters appear to provide rare and fleeting moments of comfort for men and women on the Front. In the words of Price’s Nell: chastity seems a mere waste of time in an area where youth is blotted out so quickly” (1989, p. 166). This passage highlights Nell’s recognition of the hypocrisy and futility of home front conceptions of female virtue. Indeed the sheer intensity and scope of the war’s trauma lead to a breakdown—however temporary—of traditional conceptions of feminine sexuality and desire.

Santanu Das, in his important 2005 study of touch and intimacy in First World War literature, suggests that desire, romance, and eroticism in war “[has] to be attuned to a different emotional key,” as they “take place against the hovering presence of danger and death” (p. 25). While Das in this instance is referring specifically to the response of men to other men in the trenches, this “emotional key” can easily be extended to include the complexities of male and female relationships and encounters in addition to those same-sex intimacies.⁶ Price’s *Not So Quiet*, for example, provides a powerful example of the intensity of the war’s trauma and its affect on the sexual relationships between Front line men and women. When Nell finally leaves the warzone, having suffered a breakdown after her fellow ambulance driver’s death, she is numb: “I am twenty-one and as old as the hills. Emotion-dry. The war has drained me of feeling.” (1989, p. 169). Rather than return immediately to London, where she must face her “patriotic” mother, she spends the night at a hotel in Folkestone. It is here that she meets Robin, a young second-lieutenant who is on his way to the Front. After dancing through the evening, Nell spends the night with Robin, “this Robin who is straight and clean and whole” (p. 173).

However, far removed from the terms of “conquest” and “liberation” suggested by Sandra Gilbert, Nell describes this sexual encounter as an act conducted primarily out of pity. Having experienced of the war’s terrible realities first-hand, she knows Robin’s fate. He will join the “ghostly procession” of “cruelly maimed men” (pp. 173-74) that incessantly haunt her dreams. In describing her reasons for spending the night with Robin, which are entirely divested from that of home front understandings of female sexuality and desire, she asserts:

[I]t was not only because he was whole and strong-limbed, not only because his body was young and beautiful, not only because his laughing blue eyes reflected my image without the shadow of the war rising to blot me out...but because I saw

⁶ While not specifically referenced here, the important work of Laura Doan on literary and cultural representations of female lesbian identity and relationships also informs my thinking here. See, for example, her 2001 book, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern British Lesbian Culture* (Columbia University Press), which examines the social, cultural, and political context of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).

him between me and the dance orchestra ending a shadow procession of cruelly-maimed men. (pp. 173-174)

Nell's reference to her own image, as it is reflected in Robin's eyes, is significant. Her fleeting hope is that her fragmented identity will somehow be reformed through sleeping with this young and naive soldier, whose subjectivity—for the time being—remains intact. Furthermore, as Robin has no knowledge of the war's horrific realities, he is able to see Nell as a similarly "clean and whole." Indeed, for him, Nell is still one of England's "Splendid Daughters," a "ministering angel" for the nation's wounded "Tommys." However, for Nell, this idealized identity has been fundamentally destabilized, shattered like the fragmented bodies of men she drove in the night.

As we have seen, this was the case for many of the women who worked on the Western Front as nurses, VADs, and ambulances drivers. As the war's unprecedented destruction and devastation effectively shattered home front images of "ministering angels," these women were left to negotiate an intelligible identity in the midst of the war's chaos. They, like male combatants, were indeed positioned at what Sharron Ouditt has aptly termed an "ideological junction," caught between "a traditional, idealized value system and a radical new order of experience" (1994, p. 7). It was through their wartime writing that they attempted to navigate the complexities of this precarious position. Writers such as Bagnold, Borden, Price, Rathbone, Finzi, and Brittain, describe the war's breakdown of the fundamental categories of gender and sexual difference, thereby illuminating the ambiguity, complexity, and fluidity of both femininity and female identity in wartime.

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