
THE WAR THAT CHALLENGED GENDER ROLES: ENGLISH WOMEN WAR NARRATIVES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract: Women's participation in wars, either directly or indirectly, has been the study object of war narratives since the Classical Age. This article aims to analyze women's significant role to the construction of cultural memory and how women's representations have evolved, from myth, since Homer until the early twentieth century, when the First War was declared, to the assumption of "silent victims" in wartime, and finally to the condition of proactive members of a much-dreamed society with equal opportunities for everyone. This paper addresses, more specifically, how women war narratives of the First World War reflect upon the war trauma, which brought equally disastrous consequences for women, men and children and how the War contributed to the reconfiguration of women's social roles.

Keywords: Women and War Studies; English Literature; The First World War.

Resumo: A participação das mulheres em guerras, direta e indiretamente, tem sido objeto de estudo de narrativas de guerra desde a Antiguidade Clássica. O presente artigo busca analisar o papel significativo das mulheres na construção da memória cultural e a evolução das representações femininas, desde a instância do mito, de Homero até o início do século XX, quando a Primeira Guerra foi declarada, para a presumida condição de "vítimas silenciosas" chegando, enfim, à situação de membros proativos de uma sociedade igualitária. Este artigo aponta, mais especificamente, para como as narrativas femininas da Primeira Guerra abordam o trauma da guerra, que afetou em igual escala mulheres, homens e crianças, e como a Primeira Guerra Mundial abriu terreno para a reconfiguração de papéis sociais femininos.

Palavras-chave: Narrativas femininas de guerra; Literatura inglesa; Primeira Guerra Mundial.

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The distinguishing line from myth and history is not a clear one. Wars perpetuate throughout history and so do the social representations of women roles.

The epic in which the last year of the Trojan War is described, the *Iliad*, dating from the late ninth to the eighth century BCE, based on oral tradition and conventionally attributed to a man author, abounds with references to women who have their historical representation evolved. Mary Lefkowitz reminds us that “Since epics are made up of words, a commodity to which even Greek women had legal right, one must in any discussion of women’s role pay particular attention to what women say.” (LEFKOWITZ, 2007, p. 26).

Homer ascribed important mythic and historical roles to women. Lefkowitz questions what the Trojan War would have been like without the presence of women. She ponders:

One might begin by asking what both epics, The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, would be like if there were no women in them. In the first place, neither story would have happened. The Trojan War would not have been fought, and Odysseus (assuming he had gone to Troy in the first place) would not have bothered to return home. (LEFKOWITZ, 2007, p. 27)

Wars have helped reshape women’s historical roles since the Classical Age, and some literary writings of First War England - amongst which I select Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*, Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, and Pat Barkers’s *Regeneration* - may help confirm that and contribute to a broader understanding of women’s essential part in the construction of the cultural memory of World War I.

One of the ways through which women’s social representation has evolved is due to their insertion in the workforce. Sue Blundell warns us that this has taken place since the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), described mainly by Thucydides in *History of the Peloponnesian War*². Blundell argues that:

It is clear that in the fourth century there was still a stigma attached to the working woman; but the economic troubles which Athens experienced as a consequence of the Peloponnesian War and her subsequent loss of empire would have undoubtedly produced an increase in the number of women seeking employment, and some of them may, like Aristarchus’s relatives, have been relatively well-born. (BLUNDELL, 1995, p.145)

The passage alludes to an Athenian man named Aristarchus who, according to Xenophon, had in his household nearly fourteen homeless female relatives, as a consequence of the Peloponnesian War. He would have encouraged them to start a wool-working business, which turned out to be profitable and personally rewarding for the working women and Aristarchus himself, who was later financially supported by those women living in his property.³

² For further reference on Thucydides, see Bibliography.

³ See MARTIN, Thomas R. *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, p. 166-167. The author also reports that, after having made his plan to survive postwar financial crisis, Aristarchus would

Greek warrior goddess Athena has been a source of inspiration for men and women in wartime ever since the Classical Age. By the time the First War broke out it would not have been otherwise. In the literary works contemplated by this research the most intriguing reference to Athena may be found in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The character Miss Kilman, hated by Clarissa, the protagonist, is described in a way that may resemble Athena:

Odd it was, as Miss Kilman stood there (and stand she did, with the power and taciturnity of some prehistoric monster armoured for primeval warfare), how, second by second, the idea of her diminished, how hatred (which was for ideas, not people) crumbled, how she lost her malignity, her size, became second by second merely Miss Kilman, in a mackintosh, whom heavens knows Clarissa would have liked to help. (WOOLF, 1996, p. 123)

Critics such as Bonnie Kime Scott have seen here an analogy to Britannia, the female symbol of the British Empire⁴. However, it must be taken into consideration that Britannia is herself a Roman variation of Athena. Besides, the goddess after whom the kingdom was named is more likely to appear in a seated position, with trident and helmet.

Note that the reference to the armored goddess Athena, whose various tasks in the Homeric epics included warfare, is associated with the woman who is in charge of instructing Clarissa's daughter, Elizabeth. Apart from having an in-depth historical background, Kilman "did out of her meager income set aside so much for causes she believed in; whereas [Clarissa] did nothing, believed nothing; brought up her daughter – but here was Elizabeth, rather out of breath, the beautiful girl." (WOOLF, 1996, p. 123). One of the reasons why Clarissa despises her is the possibility that her daughter's views might be influenced by Kilman, or taken forth by Elizabeth, whose taste for studies and interest for the history of her country may suggest an analogy to Elizabeth I that surpasses the homonymic realm. The following passage refers to a lesson given by the tutor, about the War:

And she talked too about the war. After all, there were people who did not think the English invariably right. There were books. There were meetings. There were other points of view. Would Elizabeth like to come with her to listen to So-and-so? (a most extraordinary-looking old man). Then Miss Kilman took her to some church in Kensington and they had tea with a clergyman. She had lent her books. Law, medicine, politics, all professions are open to women of your generation, said Kilman. But for herself, her career was absolutely ruined, and was it her fault? Good gracious, said Elizabeth, no. (WOOLF, 1996, p.127)

have befriended Socrates and asked for his advice: "The plan was a success, but the women complained that Aristarchus was now the only member of the household who ate without working. Socrates advised his friend to reply that the women should think of him as sheep did a guard dog -- he earned his share of the food by keeping away the wolves from the sheep." (167). Note the reconfiguration (by means of inversion) of social roles performed by men and women, largely perpetrated by the Peloponnesian war, in the fourth century BCE.

4 SCOTT, Bonnie Kime. Introduction. In: WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2005, p. lxvi.

As the passage stresses the complicity between teacher and student, it may be inferred that the mother-daughter relationship is compromised. In terms of identity, Kilman is closer than Clarissa to Elizabeth, and the educational background she acquires with her tutor may make Elizabeth's history a more successful one, probably a doctor (WOOLF, 1996, p. 133) in comparison with her tutor's, ostracized in postwar England for her German ancestry.

Another critic, Masami Usui, has associated Miss Kilman with the feminists of the British suffrage movement, who opposed war and were mobilized "in peace groups in eleven European countries by 1915."⁵ Usui describes Kilman as follows:

Kilman, as the most of the radical feminists against the war, has no social rank or status. She is, however, a highly educated woman. Women's higher education began to be reformed and encouraged with the establishment of Queen's College for women in London in 1848 and of Bedford College in London in 1849. (USUI, 1991, p.160)

It may be assumed, from this passage, that Elizabeth would inherit the cultural legacy of her teacher and, as a feminist doctor, do justice to her countrywomen's tradition as military suffragettes, pioneered by Elsie Inglis and Louisa Garrett Anderson, for instance.

Despite the scale of mass destruction, the First War brought unprecedented work opportunities for women. Historian Keith Robbins reminds us about women's significant insertion in the workforce during the War years and presents figures that demonstrate how the number of employed women oscillated, in a comparative scale, from 1914 to the four coming years:

There were, for example, 125 women working at Woolwich Arsenal in 1914 and 25,000 in July 1917. Three and a quarter million British women were employed in July 1914 and a little under 5 million at the close of war – the expansion being most rapid in the middle years. In France by late 1918 half a million women were directly working in war industries and some 150,000 occupied secretarial and other ancillary positions in the army. Both of these figures represented a major change from the position in 1914. (ROBBINS, 2002, p.161)

Robbins highlights, however, that women's jobs were considered under-paid in comparison with men's. Women's lower wages generated social debate in England and they "led to awkward questions being asked about equal pay, which trade union officials found scarcely more congenial than their employers did." (ROBBINS, 2002, p. 161).

Although women's salaries were still far from being satisfactory, the figures shown by Robbins lead us to think that career opportunities for women were in a constant raise. More importantly, debates on equal income had been launched. Having been granted possibilities of emancipation and self-support, postwar English women reveled in the idea of independence.

⁵ USUI, Masami. The Female Victims of the War in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In: HUSSEY, Mark. *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*. New York: Syracuse UP, 1991, p. 159.

West approaches the idea of independence in *The Return of the Soldier*, as character Jenny engages in thoughts of self-maintenance, provided that that her cousin Chris would no longer be able to support the three women financially. Jenny admires Margaret's example in helping Chris in every possible way and finds an inspiration for her own life in that. Jenny ponders that:

It means that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quite for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships." (WEST, 2004, p. 62)

It is worth to mention the poetic description of the nobility of a woman's work in the passage. Also, the term "independent spirits" suggests an idea of humanitarian effort, rather than man/women rivalry, in wartime, when men's bodies were being constantly destroyed and could use the cooperation of women's bodies, as though they were taking shifts in war, in the experience of human collapse.

In fact, Margaret Higonnet emphasizes how women's writings on the First War seem to pay special attention to the body: "The intensely detailed observation of the destruction of the body is one of the hallmarks of women's testimony about war." (HIGONNET, 1999, p. 149). Although Higonnet's statement may be applied to women war writers in general, nurses, for practical reasons, were the ones that remained closer to the wounded bodies of men who fought in the battlefields. In this sense, Brittain's memoir *Testament of Youth* excels the sensitivity of her fellow women writers: Brittain's contact with men's exposed flesh draws her a bit closer to their minds, too. Santanu Das warns that "While much attention has been paid to the war neuroses of the soldiers, the experience of the nurses may lead us to reconceptualise contemporary notions of trauma through moments of contact with the damaged body." (2006, p. 31). The quote suggests proximity to men's neurosis and somehow highlights the importance of nurse writing for a better understanding of the pain felt by those men who, in the most part, chose to remain silent about their sorrow, due to social conventions, back in the first decade of the twentieth century. Nurses' diaries carry not only medical records but an important share women have of the cultural memory of the First War.

Brittain's autobiographical novel confirms men's vulnerability to pain, the high price they had to pay for the War (the cost to their bodies and minds) and stresses the evolution of women's awareness and the new social roles they were designed to. Higonnet adds that:

Many [women] understood that they stood at a historical crossroads, when women were entering into occupations from which they had previously been barred. This war differed from previous wars in the roles that were publicly accepted for women. That change is reflected in both the content and the style of women's autobiographical writing, which reveals a consciousness that women's roles deviated from the 'home front' domesticity to which ideology consigned them. (HIGONNET, 1999, p. 150)

The passage stresses how the ideological threshold that divided men and women was surpassed in the First War, and how soldiers and non-combatants started seeing each other as equals. It may be added that women's conscious social status had a far more important role: that their work had as important a function as men's claim of having participated in combat.

Contemporary women readers and writers, such as Barker in *Regeneration*, look back in admiration to the key roles performed by those women in the early twentieth century, and their narratives of the First War persist in time and revitalize our memories of what it may have been like to live that terrible event in the flesh.

Karen Levenback acknowledges the innovation brought by Barker's novel and reminds us of the legitimacy of writing about the pain that women experience in wartime, as she concludes that:

Still others (such as the groundbreaking works of Lynne Hanley and Pat Barker) blur the boundaries between biography, history, and literature altogether. And, because there are such obvious benefits to this approach, there is also a possibility that the absence of boundaries will deprive us of both the pleasure of and insight from tracing the sometimes circuitous, but always purposeful, route taken by Virginia Woolf in coming to terms with her own experience of the war. (LEVENBACK, 1999, p. v)

Regeneration, the term used in biology for the replacement of a damaged organ by formation of new tissue, acquires a similar meaning when applied to women's war narratives: that the evolving historical representation of women, amplified by the First War, helped us shape who we are today. And the tissue textiles they started weaving, it may be said, are now gently handed to the women writers of the twenty-first century to be redesigned.

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