

Women Writing World War One: A Review Article of New Work by Higonnet, Ouditt, and Tylee, Turner, and Cardinal

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Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 2.3 (2000)

<<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss3/>>>

Katharine RODIER

Women Writing World War One: A Review Article of New Work by Higonnet, Ouditt, and Tylee, Turner, and Cardinal

In *Woman's Home Companion* for September 1919, Edith Wharton, by then well-known for her fiction, published "Writing a War Story," a short tale which ironizes the efforts of Ivy Spang, Wharton's expatriate protagonist, to depict in prose her impressions of World War I. Directed to compose for a new publication a "rattling war story ... to bring joy to the wounded and disabled in British hospitals," a made-to-order cliché which the editor outlines for her, Ivy is dazzled by the assignment: She, Ivy Spang of Cornwall-on-Hudson, had been asked to write a war story for the opening number of *The-Man-at-Arms*, to which Queens and Archbishops and Field Marshals were to contribute poetry and photographs and patriotic sentiment in autograph! And her full-length photograph in nurse's dress was to precede her prose.... Deftly, Wharton juxtaposes Ivy's apparent naiveté with her dedication to the task, of which the narrator archly inquires: "Was it any wonder that she took it seriously?" (Higonnet 392). Yet Ivy struggles not just with her high-toned impressions of her craft but with the subject matter. Having doubted whether she can even write a story in the first place, Ivy Spang embodies larger questions for Wharton: Can any woman tell a tale of war? Must she have "seen" war to write it -- and does "seeing" war strictly mean seeing combat, or seeing oneself as a combatant, traditionally male perspectives? Does seeing in such a case equal knowing, and does such vision confer authority -- even upon a woman -- to relate the experience? Ultimately, Ivy embellishes into "heart interest" one of the soldiers' accounts that her former governess had recorded while she had worked in a military hospital (Higonnet 396). When "His Letter Home," complete with author's photo, appears in print, Ivy to her dismay becomes a proto-pin-up-girl for the soldiers in the clinic where she pours tea once a week -- her only firsthand involvement with the war. To seal Ivy's devastation, the Noted Author who happens to be on her ward explains that her subject is strong but her treatment is laughable -- and then he asks the pretty girl if he may have his own souvenir photograph of her.

Simultaneously mocking her heroine and sympathizing with her ingenuous zeal, Wharton -- in fact a well-to-do philanthropist and relief worker in France during World War I -- portrays the precarious position of woman as would-be war writer, a role at which Wharton herself, despite her published efforts in that direction, would be judged less than effectual: "She and the war passed one another by, as frequently happens for noncombatants who are not pressed upon as war fighters are" (Elshtain 215). Wharton's story recasts but does not resolve a version of the dilemma that Walt Whitman articulated after attempting to render an earlier conflict, the United States Civil War: "The real war will never get in the books" (802). The ostensible impossibility of the effort had not deterred Whitman from trying, just as authors, both male and female, have continued to attempt since the first known poet, Sumerian priestess Enheduanna, circa 2300 B.C., lamented to the Spirit of War, "Who can fathom you?" (Gioseffi 198). The collections here under review further attest to the vexed history of trying to write war, focusing in particular on women's efforts to commemorate, celebrate, mourn, protest, document, fictionalize, re-create, and/or fight World War I, a conflict whose very name has eternalized its relative immensity. As Margaret R. Higonnet writes in the Introduction to *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*: "A violent introduction to the twentieth century, it eventually involved thirty-eight nations, killed roughly ten million men, wounded twenty million (including six million mutilated), and cost \$330 billion in direct and indirect costs. The number of civilian deaths is unknown: One historian cites estimates ranging from two to thirteen million dead. Among Armenians alone, perhaps one million died. The further twenty million victims of the influenza epidemic in 1918-19, the majority of them women and children, attest to the vulnerability of populations weakened by wartime shortages of food and fuel. The costs to women, however, direct and indirect, have never been comprehensively calculated" (xix).

Higonnet clarifies further the dominant tendency to write this war as male -- if not from a male perspective, then by privileging male experience: "The argument about men's inclusion in war and women's exclusion tacitly relies on a model identifying the battlefield as a place where women and

other civilians are not. That women have been omitted from histories of World War I is particularly ironic, since it was a 'total' war, in which civilian populations from around the world were caught, one in which terror (*Schreckenskrieg*) was deliberately waged against civilian populations. Airplanes, zeppelins, long-range artillery like the German Big Bertha, submarines, and gunboats carried the 'line of fire' into cities far from the front. The tidy division of landscape into battlefield and home front may be a convenient one for purposes of military and political strategy. But as women's writing reveals, the assumption that female populations stood outside the line of fire is false" (xxii). Nonetheless, literary history has tended to sweep aside women's accounts of war, even this world war, as Wharton's *Ivy Spang* exemplifies, discredited by her literal distance from combat, but also by her apparent inability to delineate a "real war" that only a "real" warrior could authenticate -- heretofore a masculinist but also a romanticized undertaking, as Paul Fussell indicates in his landmark study, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (21-22). However, defining a male-inflected mode of irony as the means to evoke a "modern mass war" (28) moves scholars such as Fussell away from equally important questions subsequently investigated by feminist scholars like Higonnet, Sharon Ouditt, Claire Tylee, and others: How has the literature of wars and warfare advocated, recorded, idealized, marginalized, or effaced women's involvement? How does a female commentator's distance -- geographically, historically, politically, philosophically, vocationally -- from the actual lines of battle shape her own recorded responses to the crisis as well as the reception of her chronicles? How has the discourse of earlier wars -- and its constructions of women within it -- influenced later reflections upon women's participation in national conflicts? How can we reconcile the traditional image of woman as "the gentler sex" or as Hegel's "Beautiful Soul" with the experiential evidence of women as ruthless killers in wartime? Compilations such as Higonnet's *Lines of Fire*, Tylee, Turner, and Cardinal's *War Plays by Women*, and Ouditt's *Women Writers of the First World War* expand the study of writing war onto such less-explored terrain, enlarging a prevalent vantage like Fussell's, creating for contemporary readers an even more multi-dimensional image of World War I as a type of recorded "real war."

Touted as "the first detailed bibliography of its kind" (i), Sharon Ouditt's *Women Writers of the First World War* annotates primary materials on the war, excluding drama or poetry, mostly written by British women from 1914-1939. To further its claim to be a "starting point" from which to compare form, voice, genre, and experience of the war (2-3), this compilation also includes what Ouditt identifies as a highly selective group of secondary sources: Literary criticism, social and cultural history, biographies, bibliographies, and reference works. Challenging the persistent view that women did not or could not write about World War I because "they weren't in it" (1), Ouditt categorizes her annotations by genre: Fiction, both novels and short fiction; contemporary accounts ranging from books and articles to official publications by the civil service, domestic employment and munitions offices, and other reporting agencies; diaries, letters, and autobiographies; journals and magazines; and references to two primary archives, the Imperial War Museum in London and the Liddle Collection in Leeds, with additional short descriptions of holdings in the Birmingham Central Library, the Trades Union Congress Library, The Fawcett Library, and the British Red Cross Museum. By documenting such a wealth of women's responses to the war, Ouditt affirms her stated purpose: "I have no wish to underestimate the suffering of ... men, nor the effect of their loss. I do wish, however, to invite consideration of the roles played by women in the conflict: Consideration of their activities -- domestic, political, professional, voluntary -- and of their own reflections" (8). In short, Ouditt's approach further interrogates the "topsy-turvy theory" which she quotes from Mrs. Alec-Tweedie's contemporary account, *Women and Soldiers: Thanks to the War*: "the world has discovered women, and women have found themselves. And a new world has been created" (52-53).

The materials that Ouditt assesses begin to suggest the truths that may lie behind such hyperbole, despite its hollow overstatement. While not comparative in its scope and contents, as Ouditt points out, the book does include helpful cross-references, honest admissions of her editorial intentions or omissions, and witty impressions of the texts under scrutiny, particularly of works of fiction. Of Dorota Flatau's 1918 *Yellow English*, Ouditt writes: "Her son, however, betrays the English, and is hurled from a cliff by the wives of drowned sailors, whom he helped to kill,

when his espionage is discovered.... The novel end with an unpleasantly robust invocation to the people of England to show no mercy for his kind" (21). Ouditt's irrepressible wit helps make this collection readable as well as informative. However, her sometimes comic or impatient summaries of what she implies are sentimental, predictable, or overblown texts tend to prove her own disclaimer: "I have not set out to provide critical evaluations lest my own values obscure the merits of particular writings. I am aware, however, that objectivity might be aspired to, but is rarely achieved" (3). Presumably, this editor could make short work of an Ivy Spang, regardless of the informing ideological tensions that such an author's overwrought creations might betray.

Ouditt's treatments of critical or historical texts are more even-handed. Regarding Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, she notes, "The authors compile a great deal of (published) evidence to make their case. They have, however, been criticised for presenting a limited view of women's war writing" (173). She offers an equally balanced and concise overview of Jean Bethke Elshtain's 1987 *Women and War*, a work of political philosophy that explores diverse discourses and the political claims and social identities that they sustain. The aim is to analyse the Just-Warrior/Beautiful-Soul formulation that separates masculine from feminine, and forms the basis of narratives of conflict. The existence of female belligerence and male compassion clearly undermines the above dichotomy and initiates the analysis of ambivalences and complexities that are the subject-matter of the study. Resources include political works, first-person war narratives, poetry, novels, anthropology, myth. The study moves towards a reconceptualising of citizenship, informed by feminist thought (190). Invaluable as a beginning reference, *Women Writers of the First World War* sets an important precedent in the unfolding study of women and warfare.

Moving outside Ouditt's primarily nationalistic scope, Claire Tylee, with Elaine Turner and Agnès Cardinal, assembles in *War Plays by Women: An International Anthology* another composite of the varied faces of war, seen in each case by a female gaze, but in these instances transformed as drama. Also envisaged as a challenge to the nominally masculine purview of knowing and telling war, this collection assembles not only war plays from the time of World War I, but subsequent treatments and revisions of that conflict and its impact. In summary, Tylee's anthology purports to cross national boundaries, to showcase alternative viewpoints, and to confront accepted gender norms, both male and female. Compounding these intentions for Tylee is the question of how -- or whether -- women writers may use traditional dramatic structures or conceptions if they seek to contest or subvert issues of force (4). The Table of Contents for *War Plays by Women* includes Marion Craig Wentworth's *War Brides* (USA, 1915), a one-act play, later a film, decrying the fates of war brides who marry in service to the fatherland; Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (USA, 1918), another one-act play, in this case asking if African Americans should take arms for a country where they have been terrorized because of their race; and two short works by Gertrude Stein, *Please Do Not Suffer* (USA, 1916), a verbal collage that satirizes bourgeois complacency, and the "anti-play" (6), *Accents in Alsace: A Reasonable Tragedy* (1919). The international roster adds Marie Lenéru's four-act *Peace* (France, 1918); Berta Lask's "huge street pageant" (7) *Liberation: 16 Tableaux from the Lives of German and Russian Women, 1914-20* (Germany, 1924); Muriel Box's three-act *Angels of War* (UK, 1935), concerning British women ambulance drivers during the conflict; Dorothy Hewett's two-act musical, *The Man from Mukinupin* (Australia, 1979); Wendy Lill's two-act *The Fighting Days* (Canada, 1984), which focuses on Canadian suffragist Francis Marion Beynon; and Christina Reid's one-act radio play, *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name* (N. Ireland, 1988), linking World War I with an ongoing contemporary conflict, the Troubles.

Following a general introduction to the collection which lucidly contextualizes the plays in terms of history, women's studies and gender studies, literature, and drama, each play commands its own introduction with fascinating production information and a list of primary and secondary texts for further reading. Thoughtfully illustrated with production stills, poster reproductions, and photos of women in war efforts, the book concludes with a checklist of published plays by women relevant to World War I, 1915-1939. Overall, *War Plays by Women* bespeaks a holistic rather than a casual conception, "suggest[ing] various ways in which these war plays by women might be related to

one another and positioned within cultural networks" (1). Of her collection, Tylee asserts, most strikingly, it provokes us to consider whether if, as Fussell argues, men's war plays tend to demonstrate irony and to have a dynamic of hope abridged (33-35), women's war plays by contrast reveal tentative optimism. Despite their confrontation with the facts of random violence, cruelty, and genocide, do they suggest the possibility of change? (4). While some contemporary critics might contend that even raising such a question betrays the interrogator as a irreclaimable innocent, others might see it as activist, if not revolutionary, in intent -- a political gesture geared toward an outcome more than simply a sentimental, plaintive wish. Similarly, Margaret R. Higonnet argues that to counter "popular misconceptions" (xxiii), *Lines Of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* presents with a three-fold revisionary purpose its international cast of authors and multiple types of writing.

By juxtaposing familiar with less well-known texts, negotiating an interdisciplinary scope, and representing women writers from Europe, Central and East Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Africa, India, Australia, and New Zealand, Higonnet directs attention not just to cultural differences and similarities, but to the impact of economics and political alignments on the citizens, including women, of a world at war. Further, through skilled translations of varied texts she enlarges in subject and in style the canon of World War I literature beyond the work of the so-called English soldier-poets, precluding in the process any simplistic understanding of her key metaphor, "lines of fire": Whether nationalist or antimilitarist, women's vision of the war was thought to be tainted by the fact that they did not do military service. That women volunteered on the Eastern front has been forgotten. That Rupert Brooke, usually thought to be a "war poet," died of disease before he ever saw combat was also forgotten. That women and children were used as human shields in Belgium and eastern France was forgotten or denied as mere propaganda. Inadequate concepts of "real" wartime experience and of its relationship to "real" or powerful writing have kept us from publishing or reading women's texts (xxiii). For Higonnet, "lines of fire," literary or representational as well as literal, can mark a woman's involvement in as much as her apparent separation from the multivalent experience of war, as this anthology amply testifies.

Besides her detailed introduction to the collection as a whole, Higonnet supplies concise introductions to each of her subsections, as well as to the work of each featured writer. Artwork by Käthe Kollwitz, Olive Mudie-Cooke, and others, photographs of posters, memorials, war artifacts and participants, and Marie Curie's X-ray of a shell fragment embedded in a soldier's hand comprise a center section of the book. Artists' biographies appear at the end of the volume, and a calendar of related events from 1901 to 1920 also augments the rich assortment of primary material that forms the body of the text. The titles of the subsections attest to the variety of the book's content and the acute vision behind its execution, as well as to the more complete extent of women's involvement in the war and in war efforts: Political Writing; Journalism: Home Front Reports / Battle Reports; Testimonial: Diaries, Memoirs, Letters, Interviews -- Battlefield / Medicine / Home Front, War Work; Short Fiction: Medicine / Home Front, War Work / Postwar Convalescence, Mourning; and Poems. Starting from a political perspective to orient her readers, Higonnet touches on women's contributions to debates over declarations of war, their reactions to mobilization through conscription, and their calls for ways to end the conflict. The writers here include German Clara Zelkin on "Proletarian Women, Be Prepared"; British Emmeline Pankhurst on "Votes for Women"; and Russian/Italian Anna Kuliscioff on "While Brother Kills Brother." Moving on to journalists like Colette, Ivanova, Mary Roberts Rinehart, and Marcelle Caby, Higonnet amplifies the offering of eyewitness accounts with autobiographical writings by combatants like Captain Flora Sandes, who fought with the Serbian Army; Turkish Armenian rebel Zabel Bournazian; and Maria Leont'evna Botchkareva, the Russian known as Yashka, who remembered her comrades-in-arms: "In the dark it seemed to me that I saw their faces, the familiar faces of Ivan and Peter and Sergei and Mitia, the good fellows who had taken such tender care of me, making a comfortable place for me in that crowded teplushka, or taking off their overcoats in cold weather and spreading them on the muddy road to provide a dry seat for Yashka. They called me. I could see their hands outstretched in my direction, their wide-open eyes straining in the night in expectation of rescue, the deathly pallor of their countenances. Could I remain indifferent to their pleas? Wasn't it my

bounden duty as a soldier, as important as that of fighting the enemy, to render aid to stricken comrades?" (161)

Further testimonial entries disclose Swiss-born Maria Naepflin's morphine addiction; the notebook confidences that Mireille Dupouey wrote for her soldier-husband, killed five months into the war; the YMCA-sponsored mission of Addie D. Waite Hunton and Kathryn M. Johnson, who co-wrote *Two Colored Women* with the American Expeditionary Forces (1920); and Virginia Woolf's diary entry on Peace Day. The Short Fiction section that includes Wharton's "Writing a War Story" opens with yet another revisionary stance, reconsidering once again Fussell's preferred ironic mode as something available, after all, to women, if distinct for such writers in subject, conflict, or tone, as Wharton's story itself illustrates. As Higonnet puts it, irony itself is a way to find a telling distance from local experience, and as these works of fiction demonstrate, women have deployed irony to express a lively sense of the illogicality and "backwash" of war, understood as a systemic phenomenon. Nurses' sketches expose the cognitive dissonance of attempting to heal men who want to die -- or whom military commanders will simply send back out to their deaths. A colonial writer notes the paradox of an empire mobilizing its colonies on behalf of the "mother nation." A socialist points to the eruption of a second "front" within a nation like Germany, when a government allied with industrialists assaults workers who strike for bread and peace (344).

Alongside works by Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, Radclyffe Hall, and Mary Borden, Higonnet sets the lesser-known but no less remarkable "The Man Whose Heart They Could See" by Romanian Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, and "Mutiny (A True Story)" by Svarnakumari Devi of India. The anthology concludes with selected poems, usually only one or two poems per poet represented, who include Anna Akhmatova, Amy Lowell, Ricarda Huch, Vera Brittain, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Gertrud Kolmar, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Isolde Kurz, Henriette Charasson, Vida Jeraj, and Marianne Moore, with many in new translations. Not contrived to suggest a poet's complete oeuvre, the careful choice and layout of these poems invites the reader to consider how each text crystallizes a particular insight on the vast war to which all of these women share some bond. In effect, as Higonnet points out, each poet inscribes a unique response to the sentiment that closes the last poem in the book, an anonymous Malawi Song: "Why did people die?" (556). Brilliantly theorized, scrupulously researched and documented, imaginatively conceived, cogently organized, and emotionally resonant, the collection *Lines of Fire* stands as a model of innovative inquiry, accessible to the general or the casual reader, but also enlightening to more advanced scholars in literary, political, and cultural studies, and to their students.

Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I, War Plays by Women: An International Anthology, and *Women Writers of the First World War: An Annotated Bibliography* all contribute crucially to the literature of a significantly burgeoning field. Margaret R. Higonnet's comment on the texts that she incorporates into her own stunning anthology could as well refer to the collective project of these three volumes under review: The texts here challenge the normative restriction of the history and literature of war to accounts of the battlefield. The narrow focus of traditional history tends to obscure from view the endemic, even epidemic, effects of war in many countries: Disrupted agriculture, forced labor, food shortages, inflation up to 120 percent or 200 percent, disease, and the destruction of homes and monuments. The distinguishing feature of "total" war is its engulfment of entire populations and its indiscriminating distribution of death, suffering, and hunger across class lines, from urban women to tribal women.... "Combat" is not the total sum of "war" (xx-xxi). Recognizing that so many texts and visions may constitute the necessarily fragmented recounting of any "real war," the insightful and much-needed work of these three volumes grants room in the study of World War I literature even for an Ivy Spang -- or an Edith Wharton -- alongside a Yashka, a Mata Hari, a Berta Lask, the Beti women of Cameroon, or an already-canonized male soldier-poet.

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