

**Radboud University**



**“Nobody asked what the women thought”:**

An Analysis of the Relationship between Women and War in British

Women’s Poetry of the First World War (1914-1918)

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## Summary

This thesis investigates an aspect of British First World War poetry which has not yet received much scholarly attention, namely the poems written by women about this conflict. Male soldiers like Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke and Isaac Rosenberg have all become important names in anthologies of World War I poetry, but female poets are still missing in these poetry collections and the research that has been written about them. Since the 1980s, some studies have focused on women's poetry of the First World War but there are still many topics left unexplored.

One of these subjects is the way in which the relationship between women and war is represented in women's Great War poetry. This thesis takes a closer look at this connection by analysing three topics which are related to gender and war, and which represent a traditional idea on women's relationship to war. These topics are: the spatial opposition between the male battlefield and the female home front, women's work and role during wartime, the role of the mother figure in war. Each one of these topics is analysed in women's war poetry and the goal of these analyses is to improve our understanding of the relationship in women's Great War poetry between gender, on the one hand, and nature, nationalism, war, and literature, on the other hand. The main research question in this thesis is whether women's poems confirm or challenge traditional ideas on women and war. This question is explored by using theories on gender and war (Goldstein 2001), gender and space (Spain 1992; Massey 1994), ecofeminism (Ruether 1995), liberal feminism, difference feminism and postmodern feminism. The historical context of the First World War, especially the female wartime experience, also forms an important part of this thesis. As its primary material, this thesis mainly uses Catherine Reilly's anthology *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (1981), as well as individual poetry collections by female poets such as Vera Brittain, Jessie Pope, and Margaret Sackville. Occasionally, this thesis also analyses poems written by male soldiers in order to demonstrate that there are sometimes clear differences between men and women's war poems.

This thesis argues that because of the enormous diversity of women's poetry of the First World War, both positive and negative responses to traditional ideas on women and war can be found. Whereas on the one hand, there are poems which are nationalistic in tone, which construct the home front as an ideal place representing female beauty, kindness and safety, or which describe the mother figure as the ultimate symbol of maternal protection and love, on the other hand, there are poems which challenge conventional ideas on women's role in wartime. These poems, for instance, contest the idea that only men are allowed to fight or they defy women's role as supporter of war by containing pacifist ideas in which the war is criticized.

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## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Theory on gender and war: the First World War as a gendered conflict .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1. The universality of gendered war roles .....	15
2.2. Reasons behind the separation of male and female wartime roles .....	17
2.3. Wartime roles for men and women .....	19
2.4. Conclusion .....	27
<b>3. Male and female spaces: the home front versus the battlefield .....</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1. Theory on gender and space .....	29
3.2. The female home front versus the male battlefield .....	30
3.2.1. The safe and beautiful home front versus the dangerous and tough battlefield .....	30
3.2.2. Ecofeminist theory .....	33
3.2.3. The growth of nature on the home front versus natural destruction on the battlefield ...	35
3.3. The relationship between the two fronts .....	39
3.3.1. Crossing the border between the home front and the battle zone .....	39
3.3.1.1. <i>Men in female spaces</i> .....	39
3.3.1.1. <i>Women in male spaces</i> .....	40
3.3.2. The border between the two fronts .....	42
3.3.2.1. <i>The line between safety and danger: feeling locked up or protected?</i> .....	42
3.3.2.1. <i>The imaginary wall as a symbol of the lack of understanding between both worlds ..</i>	44
<b>4. Women's role in the First World War .....</b>	<b>50</b>
4.1. Supporting the war by means of women's labour .....	50
4.1.1. Women workers in male roles .....	52
4.1.1.1. <i>Historical context</i> .....	52

4.1.1.2. <i>Analysis of the poems</i> .....	55
4.1.2. Women workers in female roles .....	60
4.1.3. Contesting women’s wartime work .....	64
4.2. Supporting the cause of the war .....	68
4.2.1. Women’s patriotic and optimistic poetry .....	68
4.2.2. Women’s critical anti-war poetry.....	73
<b>Chapter 5: The Mother Figure .....</b>	<b>81</b>
5.1. The mother figure in war poetry: Mother England.....	82
5.2. The mother in soldiers’ poetry: positive versus negative .....	84
5.3. The ideal and caring mother in women’s poetry .....	86
5.4. The pain and grief of war mothers in women’s poetry.....	87
5.5. Humanizing soldiers through the use of the mother figure in women’s poetry.....	94
<b>6. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>7. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>105</b>
7.1. Primary literature .....	105
7.2. Secondary literature .....	110
<b>8. Images appendix .....</b>	<b>120</b>

## 1. Introduction

The First World War (1914-1918) was an important event in British history that had a profound impact on British literature. Not only during but also after the war, a large body of literature consisting of poetry, autobiographies, novels and theatre plays, was published. It is especially the poetry that was written about this conflict that has interested scholars. According to Catherine Reilly, “[t]he vast quantity of poetry and verse published during the First World War, 1914-18, is now regarded as a phenomenon in the history of English literature” (xxxiii). During the First World War Centenary, which started on 28 July 2014 and ended on 11 November 2018 at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, these poems played a central role. At commemoration ceremonies, famous World War I poems by writers such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Rupert Brooke were recited by well-known actors. One of the most famous poems, which was read at almost every ceremony, was Laurence Binyon’s “For the Fallen” (1914) which contains the famous line “They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old” (13). During the Shrouds of the Somme service, for instance, which took place in London in 2018, this poem was read by famous British actor Jim Carter (*Kentish, Never Such Innocence*). Another well-known poem is John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” (1915) in which he refers to the red poppies that grew on the graves in Flanders. These flowers would later become an important memorial symbol for all soldiers who died during armed conflicts (Iles 201). During the remembrance service of the Battle of Passchendaele in Ypres in July 2017, it was Dame Helen Mirren who read this poem out loud (Boffey, *The Guardian*).

What is interesting about First World War poetry is that not all of the poems were written by established literary authors. Though it is true that some well-known writers such as Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence and Rudyard Kipling wrote about this war, there were also many civilians and soldiers without much literary experience who wrote poems about this conflict. Their verse, “good, bad and indifferent” (Reilly xxxiii), appeared in newspapers, journals and if they could afford it, in small volumes. According to Reilly, this “poetry was written, and presumably read, on quite a large scale” (xxxiii). At a time when “the printed word was the prime means of mass communication in an era without radio and television broadcasting” (Reilly xxxiii), many British people wrote about the war and their responses to this conflict showed much diversity. Whereas some writers used their poetry to support and glorify the war, others saw poetry as a means of expressing their critique. Rupert Brooke’s poems, for instance, are known for their “solemn young heroism” (Kazantzis xvii). The anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, on the other hand, were highly critical of this war and mainly focused on the horrors of the trenches.

This war poetry has been collected in anthologies that have been published since the ending of World War I, more than one hundred years ago. What is interesting about the anthologies that were published after the end of the war is that most of them exclusively focus on the poetry that has been written by the soldiers who fought at the front. Whereas in the poetry collections that were published during the war, women's poems were still present, this was no longer the case after the war (Buck, "Writing" 87). As Catherine Reilly has observed, some of these post-war anthologies also "include some naval and air force verse, and the work of [...] well-established literary lions" (xxxiv), but what most of them all have in common is that "[t]he contribution by women has been largely ignored" (xxxiv). Similarly, the research on First World War poetry has also mainly been dedicated to the poetry written by male poets. In Paul Fussell's influential work *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), for instance, "[t]he combatants' resentment is the primary, privileged experience" (Campbell 206). If, as James Campbell has argued, women's poems are discussed in these anthologies at all, then it is always the patriotic poems written by female writers, which are used to demonstrate the complete lack of understanding that naive women at home had of the reality of war (206). Other studies which exclusively focused on the trench poetry written by canonized war poets are John H. Johnston's *English Poetry of the First World War: A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form* (1964), Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918* (1964) and Jon Silkin's *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979). In this thesis I will focus on the forgotten, or rather ignored, poetry that was written by female writers during and after the Great War, in order to demonstrate that their poetry was much more than just romantic and jingoistic verse about a conflict that cost the lives of millions of men.

In her large bibliographical research on First World War poetry, Catherine Reilly has discovered that at least 532 of the 2225 British poets who wrote about the Great War were women (xxxiii). These female poets represented a larger group than the soldier poets who made up only one fifth of the total number of poets (Reilly xxxiii). Even though female poets have made a significant contribution to the poetry of the First World War, their work has almost completely been overlooked by anthologists and scholars. Before the first studies into women's poetry of the First World War started to appear in the 1980s, the only women whose poems were included in post-war anthologies were May Wedderburn Cannan, Charlotte Mew, Alice Meynell, Fredegond Shove and Elizabeth Daryush (e.g. in Dickinson 1945; Parsons 1965; Larkin 1973; Stallworthy 1984).

Catherine Reilly believes that one of the reasons for this neglect of women's poetry has been "the received view of 'women at home' as ignorant and idealistic" (xxxv) that was present in the poems by soldier poets. It is this view of the idealistic woman at home who has no idea what the war is truly like for the male soldiers, which is expressed in Siegfried Sassoon's misogynist poem "Glory of Women"

(1918). In this poem he writes about all the women at home who “are knitting socks to send [their] son[s]” (13) and who “love us when we’re heroes, home on leave, / Or wounded in a mentionable place” (1-2). While the mother is glorifying her son’s deeds and thinking about the war in a romanticised way, the son’s “face is trodden deeper in the mud” (14). Women’s poetry was expected to contain badly-written sentimental and patriotic ideas about the war and for readers who were looking for high-standard and more critical poems about the First World War, these poems by female poets were simply not interesting. This view, as Reilly has argued, has been completely false. She admits that some of the poems by women were indeed “very bad poems” (xxxiv), but she continues by saying that this was also the case for male poets. The truth is that not all women poets were “rabidly pro-war activists who were eager to send men to die in a hellish war from which their gender sheltered them” (Campbell 206). Quite the contrary, women’s poetry was much more diverse than that. There were women like Jessie Pope who wrote nationalistic poems, but others like Lady Margaret Sackville were very critical of the war. Reilly has even observed that “[w]omen were writing their own protest poetry long before Owen and Sassoon” (xxxv).

Gill Plain offers us another reason why women poets were ignored in post-war poetry anthologies. She links their absence in poetry collections to the fact that women’s poetry was simply too diverse and could therefore not easily be understood by scholars who were looking for one collective label that they could put on women’s war poems. As Plain writes: “[I]acking the superficial homogeneity of the soldier-poets’ experience of life in the trenches, or even a cohesive vision of life on the home front, these disparate [female] writers stubbornly resist comfortable categorization as chroniclers, defenders or even supporters of the conflict” (42). Indeed, as Maria Geiger has written, “[t]he poetry women wrote during the war years was vast, incredibly diverse, and defied categorization” (6).

Another way in which we can explain the complete ignorance of women’s poetry in First World War poetry anthologies is by referring to James Campbell’s idea of ‘combat gnosticism’. James Campbell argues that in First World War poetry, “the term “war” [is equated] with the term “combat”” (204). The result of this is the idea that “war literature is produced exclusively by combat experience” (Campbell 204). All the other experiences of war are ignored, simply because they are not considered “as legitimate war writing” (Campbell 203). What Campbell means by his term ‘combat gnosticism’ is “the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience” (203). Combat gnosticism is thus “a construction that gives us war experience as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows” (Campbell 204). The consequence of this is that only those who have experienced the war, the male soldiers, are entitled to write about it. Campbell’s main critique is

that scholars who have focused on First World War poetry have simply taken over this early twentieth-century belief. As he writes, “the scholarship in question does not so much criticize the poetry which forms its subject as replicate the poetry’s ideology” (203). Scholars have thus uncritically adopted the “the atavistic feeling that war is man’s province and [that it] has no room for woman” (Khan 1). As Judith Kazantzis has written, war is seen as “a male-run ‘show’” (xxiii) in which women have no role to play. Women’s poetry has thus been excluded from First World War poetry anthologies because scholars simply believed that World War I poetry only includes the poems written by combatants about the trench experience.

Nosheen Khan has argued that even though these reasons help us to understand why editors did not include women poets in war anthologies, “there is a negligence which cannot be excused or justified” (2), especially because of the fact that “[t]he First World War is notable for having transformed woman’s conventional role of mere spectator of a male event into one of active participant, at various levels, in the war machine” (2). Many scholars agree with her that women’s poetry of the Great War deserves more attention. Since the 1980s, several scholars have attempted to rediscover the poems written by female writers. Some of them published the poems that they had rediscovered in anthologies, as Catherine Reilly did, for instance, in her work *Scars Upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (1981), the first anthology which focused exclusively on female poets and which was based on extensive bibliographical research. Another more recent anthology of women’s war poetry is Vivien Newman’s *Tumult & Tears: The Story of the Great War Through the Eyes and Lives of Its Women Poets* (2016). There were also scholars who decided to include the poems they had discovered in their articles or books on women’s poetry of the First World War. This happened, for instance, in one of the first major critical studies of women’s war poetry, namely Nosheen Khan’s *Women’s Poetry of the First World War* (1988). Other important scholars who have worked on women’s poetry of the First World War are Claire Buck (2005 & 2010), Margaret R. Higonnet (1999 & 2013), Argha Banerjee (2014), Sandra M. Gilbert (1983), Joan Montgomery Byles (1985 & 1995) and Janis P. Stout (2005).

The editors and scholars that focused on women’s war poetry all distanced themselves from the belief that war poetry is restricted to the poems written by male combatants. Instead, as Nosheen Khan has argued, they believed that “anyone affected by war is entitled to comment upon it” (2). As Claire Buck has stated, these feminist scholars all criticized “the assumption that war is an exclusively male experience” (“Writing” 87). According to them the female voice also “deserve[d] to be read, studied and argued over” (Sillars 42). They thus redefined the term ‘war writing’ by including the perspectives of other people who were not soldiers. They added “a new dimension” (Khan 3) to the anthologies of war poetry, and by doing this they challenged the existing male literary canon of First

World War poetry. Their main argument was that we cannot possibly understand the First World War if we only focus on the experience of one group. If we truly want to understand the impact of this war from a literary perspective then we have to take into account other voices as well, including those of women. Nosheen Khan has argued, for instance, that “women’s war poetry cannot be ignored for it adds [...] a new vista to understanding the truth of war” (3). Janis P. Stout agrees with this when she writes: “attention to the war poetry written by women is essential if we are to achieve fullness and balance in our view of the landscape of war writing” (59). This idea that the female perspective on the war could offer us completely new insights into the Great War is illustrated in the following quote from Vera Brittain, author of the well-known autobiography *Testament of Youth* (1933): “I see things other than [male writers], have seen, and some of the things they perceived, I see differently” (qtd. in Khan 3). Moreover, by letting the women poets of the First World War finally speak for themselves in their poems, these critics also allowed female poets to challenge the false and negative image that the soldier poets presented of them in their verse.

This scholarly interest in women’s poetry of the First World War was combined with a growing attention for other kinds of women’s writing about the Great War. In their book *Women’s Writing on the First World War* (1999), Agnès Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman and Judith Hattaway have collected sixty-nine short stories, letters, diary entries, etc. written by female authors. Another important anthology of women’s war writing is Angela K. Smith’s *Women’s Writing of the First World War: An Anthology* (2000) in which she has collected a diverse range of letters, short stories and fragments from novels by writers such as Virginia Woolf, Enid Bagnold, Helen Zenna Smith, Sylvia Pankhurst and Winifred Holtby. In the introduction of her book she writes that the goal of her anthology is “to reclaim the Great War as an arena of female experience” (Smith, “Introduction” 1). She argues that the works which have only focused on the male combatant experience have given us “a misrepresentation of the experience of 1914-18” (Smith, “Introduction” 1). She continues by stating that the soldiers were only “a distinct minority of the population. [...] What [the] majority actually did, how they actually felt, has for many years been obscured by the overriding horror of the life of the trench soldier” (Smith, “Introduction” 1). What she tries to do in her book is “redressing the balance” (Smith, “Introduction” 1). Other important works on women’s writing of the First World War are Sharon Ouditt’s *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (1994), Claire M. Tylee’s *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women’s Writings, 1914-1964* (1990), Angela K. Smith’s *The Second Battlefield: Women, Modernism and the First World War* (2000), Trudi Tate and Suzanne Raitt’s *Women’s Fiction and the Great War* (1997) and lastly, Dorothy Goldman’s edited work *Women and World War I: The Written Response* (1993).

This interest in the female experience of the First World War is also present in the works of several historians who have investigated women's role during the Great War. At the time when Catherine Reilly published her anthology on women's war poetry, not many historians had investigated the position of women in the Great War, as becomes clear from the words of British social historian Arthur Marwick who wrote in his book *Women at War, 1914-1918* (1977) that "[s]urprisingly, very little has [...] been written on women's experience during the war" (8). Since the 1980s, various historians have decided to no longer ignore the female experience of the First World War. In their studies, they have argued that women had a significant role to play in the Great War, and for this reason, the female experience of World War I deserves just as much attention as the male soldier experience. In her book *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (1981), Gail Braybon, for instance, takes a closer look at the role of women in British society during the Great War. Although it is true that some women stayed at home and passively waited for their men to return, many other women had a much more active role to play. At the home front, for instance, women supported the war effort by working in munitions factories or by occupying the jobs that male soldiers had in British society before they went to the front, for instance working as a police officer or a bus driver (Braybon 45-46). Other women worked as nurses at the hospitals in Great Britain or the ones close to the battlefields (Hallett 2-3). Moreover, women played an immensely important role in recruiting men for the war (Gullace, "White Feathers" 182). One example of this was the so-called white feathers campaign during the beginning of the war, in which women handed out white feathers to the, in their eyes, cowardly men who had decided not to enlist (Gullace, "White Feathers" 182). On the other hand, there were also many women activists who promoted pacifism, for example Sylvia Pankhurst (Byles, "Women's Experience" 473). Another scholar whose name needs to be mentioned here is American historian Susan R. Grayzel. She has published many influential books and articles on the female experience of the Great War. Some of her most important works are *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (1999) and *Women and The First World War* (2013).

The result of the academic interest in women's poetry, which according to Gill Plain marked an end to the "sixty-year exile in the no man's land of canonical exclusion" (42), was that the First World War poetry anthologies that were published after the 1980s now also contained poems by female writers. Tim Kendall's *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (2017) and George Walter's *In Flanders Fields: Poetry of the First World War* (2004), for instance, both contain poems by female authors. Anne Varty has noted, however, that the anthologies in which women poets are included, "tend to repeat both the poets and work from Reilly's selection" (41). Another point of critique on the poems that are included in these anthologies is expressed by scholar Deborah Tyler-Bennett. She criticizes these anthologies for only "concentrating on the familiar genres of elegy, testimony and

incident” (Tyler-Bennett 86). She continues by stating that “[p]oets who use allegorical, mythical or fantastic narratives to critique the impact of war [...] are largely neglected in collections of war poetry” (Tyler-Bennett 86). In other words, despite scholars’ effort to rediscover the large amount of poems that have been written by female poets, there are still many female war poets whose work remains overlooked. Further research on this topic is thus still needed.

Most of the studies on women’s poetry of the First World War have focused on individual female poets (Higonnet 2013; Murdoch 2009; Smulders 1993) or the genre of the elegy and the way in which women poets dealt with loss and death in these elegiac poems (Buck 2010; Banerjee 2016; Plain 1995; Montefiore 1998; Higonnet 2007; Gillis 2009). Other studies have remained more general and have, for instance, investigated the themes and motifs that were central in female poetic responses to the war (Khan 1988; Banerjee 2014; Montgomery Byles 1985 & 1995; Sillars 2007; Tyler-Bennett 2001; Stout 2016; Geiger 2015). A topic which has not yet received much attention from literary scholars, however, is the relationship between war and gender in these poems by female writers. There have been many historical and sociological studies that have addressed the role of gender in war in a general sense, or more specifically in the case of the First World War. However, there have not been many literary studies on this subject.

In this thesis, I will investigate the relationship between gender and war as it is expressed in women’s poetry of the First World War. As several scholars who have written about war and gender have argued, “[g]ender roles are nowhere more prominent than in war” (Goldstein i). According to Jean Bethke Elshain, the “prototypical emblems and identities” (3) in war are those of men fighting in battle and women staying at home where they mourn their dead sons or husbands. Even though it would be interesting to also take a look at constructions of masculinity in wartime, in my research I will only focus on what these poems have to say about wartime femininity and the traditional role of women during war. The research question that will be central in this dissertation is the following: how did female poets of the First World War respond to traditional ideals regarding the relationship between women and war in their poetry? My main interest lies in discovering whether the poems written by female poets affirmed or challenged the traditional ideas on women’s role during wartime.

I will answer this research question by first taking a closer look at general theories on gender and war in order to establish what the traditional ideas on women’s wartime role were historically. In this part of my thesis, I will mostly draw on Joshua S. Goldstein’s work *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (2001). In this book, Goldstein discusses the universality of gender roles during wartime and he explains how we can account for this gendered separation of war roles. After this general theoretical discussion of war and gender, I will take a closer look at the First

World War and Great Britain, and I will particularly focus on how the traditional ideas on men and women's wartime roles were reflected in British society during the Great War. Taking into account the fact that the First World War was also the first real modern war, I will also consider what effect modern warfare had on the ideal of wartime femininity in the case of the Great War. Whereas in previous wars it was, for instance, expected that women passively stayed at home, in the First World War, as Susan R. Grayzel writes, "the full participation of both combatants and noncombatants" (*Identities 2*) was required.

In chapters three, four and five, I will present the results of my analysis of the poems. Each chapter is dedicated to one specific topic related to women and war. The three topics are: the spatial division between the home front and the battlefield as male and female spaces, women's work and role in wartime, and thirdly, the traditional figure of the war mother. For each topic, I will discuss how women's war poems responded to the traditional ideals that these three subjects represent. In chapter three, I will investigate whether women's First World War poetry indeed constructed the battlefield and the home front as gendered spaces with respectively male and female characteristics. In this chapter, I will use the works of Doreen Massey (1994) and Daphne Spain (1992) for more insight into the relationship between space and gender. As a theoretical framework for my analysis of the representation of nature in these gendered spaces, I will use the ideas of ecofeminist theory (Ruether 1995). In chapter four, I will analyse how female poets addressed the separation of wartime roles for men and women in their poetry. I will discuss some important historical context regarding women's work during the Great War, and I will focus on whether women writers confirmed the gendered division of war roles in their poetry, or whether they used their poems to challenge the traditional separation of wartime roles for men and women. In this chapter, I will use theories on liberal, postmodern and difference feminism (Goldstein 2001) to explain the more critical reaction of some women's poems to the traditional female role as supporter of the war. In chapter five, I will investigate whether the mother figure in women's poetry of the First World War corresponded to the traditional image of the war mother as it was presented in propaganda posters, for instance. I will analyse the representation of the mother figure in women's World War I poems to see whether these poems confirmed or subverted the traditional image of the patriotic, loving and nurturing war mother. Susan R. Grayzel's (1999) theoretical ideas on the relationship between war and motherhood during the Great War will be central in this chapter.

As the primary material for my research I will use the poems that are collected in Catherine Reilly's anthology *Scars Upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (1981). Apart from this, I will also use individual collections by female poets, for example Lady Margaret Sackville's *The Pageant of War* (1916), Jessie Pope's *War Poems* (1915), and Vera Brittain's *Verses of a*

V.A.D. (1918). In some cases, I will also take a closer comparative look at poems written by male soldiers to demonstrate that apart from similarities, there are also clear differences between how male and female poets sometimes looked at certain topics. The aim of this research is to analyse a wide variety of poems written by British women of diverse backgrounds in order for my research to be based on a representative sample of women's poetic responses to the war. I will, for instance, analyse poems by women who have had different roles in this war: mothers, wives, daughters, nurses on the front or at home, munitions workers, ambulance drivers etc. Moreover, I will also focus on different attitudes towards the war (e.g. pacifist, nationalist, jingoist etc.). A final criteria for the poems that I will analyse is that I will select poems written by well-established poets such as Nancy Cunard, Rose Macaulay, Alice Meynell and Charlotte Mew, as well as poems from lesser-known poets such as Lilian M. Anderson, Nora Bomford and Helen Hamilton.

In this thesis, I will argue that women's poetry of the First World War, because of its enormous diversity, both confirms and challenges the conventional ideals regarding women's role in war. On one side of the spectrum we find poems which clearly reflect the traditional ideas on the relationship between women and war. These poems, for instance, define the home front as a characteristically female space of safety, kindness, tranquility and love, or they contain the traditional image of the patriotic mother, proudly sending her sons to the war. I will argue that these kinds of responses are the result of the fact that traditional ideas on war and men's and women's role in it, were deeply embedded in nations like Great Britain during World War I. As Joshua S. Goldstein has argued, the gendered war system is so "ubiquitous and robust" (412) that it cannot easily be challenged. These conventions had existed for centuries and because of the great pressure that British patriarchal society imposed on men and women during the First World War, female poets could not easily challenge these age-old assumptions regarding women's role in war, especially not because of the fact that if they did so, they would risk being seen as unpatriotic. Moreover, at a time when a nation is at war and people's lives are turned completely upside-down, these traditional ideals which clearly defined women's role in wartime could also help female poets find a direction in their lives, one that was both meaningful and familiar to them. On the other side of the spectrum we find those poems which question and contest traditional beliefs about women's position in a society at war. These poems suggest, for instance, that women should also be allowed to fight, or they contest the idea that women ought to be patriotic and enthusiastic supporters of the war by containing a strong female anti-war voice. I will argue that these rejections of traditional wartime roles were influenced by the early twentieth-century feminist movements in Great Britain which challenged British patriarchal society and its ideas on women and their proper role in society.

Finally, the goal of this study is to make a contribution to a specific field of study which, despite recent efforts by academics, still has not received enough scholarly attention. In this research I will investigate a perspective on the First World War that hitherto has almost completely been ignored, namely that of women. In this way, I hope to offer a new interpretation of First World War poetry, one that will help us understand better the complicated nature of this conflict. By taking a closer look at female war poetry, I want to align myself with those scholars who have challenged the belief that First World War literature only includes texts written by male soldiers. Even if we still see war nowadays as a male affair, the poems that I will analyse in this dissertation will clearly show that the opposite is true, and that women have always been just as much involved in war as men.

## **2. Theory on gender and war: the First World War as a gendered conflict**

In his influential book *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (2001), American scholar Joshua S. Goldstein argues that “[g]ender roles are nowhere more prominent than in war” (i). During wartime, according to him, there are always clearly demarcated constructions of masculinity and femininity. In his work, he explores these different war roles for men and women respectively, and he mainly focuses on the question why this distinction exists. In this part of my thesis, I will discuss Goldstein’s ideas on war and gender. More specifically, I will focus on what he has written about the universality of gendered war roles, what these specific male and female roles generally are, and finally, how we can account for the gendered separation of wartime roles. In the following discussion I will refer to specific historical examples from the First World War in order to demonstrate how this violent conflict was gendered in Great Britain.

### **2.1. The universality of gendered war roles**

According to Goldstein, “gender roles show great diversity across cultures and through history” (7). He writes, for instance, that “[h]uman beings have created many forms of marriage, sexuality, and division of labor in household work and child care” (7). In his book, Goldstein argues that “gender roles *outside* war vary greatly” (7). In war, however, and this is Goldstein’s main claim, “gender roles [...] are very consistent across all known human societies” (3). As the following quote illustrates, it does not matter what kind of society the nation represents outside of war, because gender roles during war will always be culturally consistent: “[t]he gendering of war is similar across war-prone and more peaceful societies, as well as across very sexist and relatively gender-equal societies” (Goldstein 19).

The same kind of diversity exists in the way in which war is waged in different cultures. As an example Goldstein refers to the Mundurucú in Brazil who, in contrast to most other groups, fought wars for “no apparent instrumental purpose” (Goldstein 8). The two World Wars also differed in many respects from previous wars. Goldstein mentions that before 1914, most wars took place on a battlefield far away from home. Both World Wars, however, “hit extremely close to home” (Goldstein 8) and “put civilians and everyday life right in the firing line” (Goldstein 9). As he writes, “[t]he World Wars made entire societies into war machines and therefore into targets. In such cases the “home front” and the “war front” become intimately connected” (9). Indeed, “forms of war vary greatly” (Goldstein 7) across cultures but there is one thing which all wars have in common, namely “their gendered character” (Goldstein 7). As Goldstein writes in the introduction of his book, “this diversity [of kinds of warfare and gender roles outside of war] disappears when it comes to the *connection* of

war with gender. That connection is more stable, across cultures and through time, than are either gender roles outside of war or the forms and frequency of war itself" (9).

According to Goldstein, gender roles during wartime are simple: while men have to fight as soldiers, women are almost always excluded from this experience. Women's task in wartime is to stay at home where they have to fulfil multiple war support roles (Goldstein 9). Goldstein notes that in the twenty-first century not much has changed: "combat forces [...] almost totally exclude women, and the entire global military system has so few women and such limited roles for them as to make many of its most important settings all-male" (Goldstein 11). Even in the Israel Defense Forces, which is one of the few military armies with mandatory military service for both men and women, less than 4% of all the female soldiers in 2014 worked in the army's combat positions. The remaining 96% of Israeli female soldiers all worked in so-called 'combat-support' roles, for example cleaning the guns (Maryles Sztokman, *The Atlantic*). As one attorney wrote on the position of female soldiers in the Israeli army: "[w]hen female soldiers receive packages with men's underwear and aftershave, the message is that they are not supposed to be there" (qtd. in Maryles Sztokman, *TheAtlantic.com*).

It is important to mention that Goldstein considers the universality of wartime roles for men and women across cultures and time to be nearly consistent. In his own work, he already acknowledges that there are two significant exceptions to his claim that wartime gender roles are consistent for all wars. First of all, he admits that his strict distinction between men as warriors and women as non-combatants is not true for every war, since there have been many conflicts throughout history in which women have participated in combat. This already became clear in the example of the Israeli army which also includes female soldiers. Another example of an army which contained women was the Soviet Union in the Second World War. When the army of the Soviet Union was "absolutely desperate" (Goldstein 22), since it could no longer find male soldiers, female combatants were recruited as well. Even though these women were only a very small group within the Soviet Union military, approximately a few thousand women fought on their side, these women did have important roles to play, for instance as snipers or fighter pilots (Goldstein 22). Such exceptions are important because they help us realize that not all wars have only been fought by men. However, examples like these two are rare, and in most wars male soldiers are still the standard. In total, female combatants "amount to far fewer than 1 percent of all warriors in history" (Goldstein 10). When women fought in wars at all, they were "still [...] a minority in a mostly male army" (Goldstein 21) which saw its male combatants as "the primary fighters" (Goldstein 19).

The second exception is that with regards to women's roles in wartime there is not so much consistency across cultures and time. The only thing which women from diverse cultural backgrounds

have in common during wartime is that in almost all cases they do not have to fight. Apart from this, however, “women’s war roles vary considerably from culture to culture” (Goldstein 10) and from war to war. Here we see how cultures and historical contexts sometimes do have an influence on gender roles during war. Whereas in previous wars, for instance, British women’s lives were not deeply affected by war, this all changed during the two World Wars when women became an active part of the war effort (Grayzel, *Identities* 2). During war there are simply more options to choose from for women than for men. In reality, there is only one real role in wartime for men, namely to fight in the combat forces. If they do not want to do this, then the options on the battlefield are very limited. Examples of non-combatant male jobs in the army are being a military doctor, a technician, an interpreter, or for instance a computer expert. Women, on the other hand, have always had a wide range of wartime roles to choose from. They can, for instance, be “support troops, psychological war-boosters, peacemakers, and so forth” (Goldstein 10). As will become clear in my discussion of gender roles during the First World War in section 2.3., this diversity of wartime roles for women also existed during World War One. During this war, there was not just one role for women. Instead, women supported the war in a number of ways, for instance by convincing men to sign up, by supporting the soldiers on the front with food, by working in munitions factories at home, or by working as a nurse.

## **2.2. Reasons behind the separation of male and female wartime roles**

Goldstein argues that the reasons for the separation between men and women’s roles in wartime fall into two different categories. The first category consists of explanations that are grounded in the “small, innate biological gender differences” (Goldstein 6) between men and women. In this case it is about inborn qualities, such as size, strength, testosterone levels or physique which differentiate men from women. The idea behind this category is that women are not used as soldiers in wars because they cannot fight as well as men. Men were simply born to be warriors. According to Goldstein these arguments based on the biological differences between men and women cannot completely account for why women have been excluded from most wars as soldiers. The reason for this is that the idea that women cannot fight as well as men is simply wrong. The supposed female “lack of ability” (Goldstein 5) can namely be contrasted to the numerous examples in history in which women had to fight in wars. As Goldstein has argued, “[t]his historical record shows that women are capable of performing successfully in war” (5). It is thus not possible for us to conclude that women were only excluded from combat experience because they were not able to fight in the army.

If we truly want to understand the reasons behind the near total exclusion of women in combat forces, then we also have to take a closer look at the second category which includes gender

differences between men and women, based in the different cultural socialization of boys and girls, to explain why only men are seen as potential soldiers. These gender differences are not present at birth but they are learnt later on in life. During these different socializations, boys are made into tough warriors and girls into loving and tender housewives (Goldstein 4). It is this kind of “gender segregation” (Goldstein 4) which already starts in childhood before the war that determines men’s and women’s roles during wartime. As Goldstein writes, “[t]he socialization of children into gender roles helps reproduce the war system” (6). In this case the question is not so much whether women can fight in wars, but whether they should according to the standards of their culture. According to Goldstein, it is the “tendency towards childhood gender segregation – marked by boys’ rougher group play – [which] works against the later integration of capable women into warfighting groups” (403). Societies only prepare boys to become soldiers and it is this lack of preparation for women which disadvantages female combatants. Their societies do not teach them how to become tough and brave soldiers and as a consequence women are not seen as potential fighters, only men are. At the same time, however, this view that only men can be considered soldiers is exactly what influences the gender segregation of warriors versus housewives in the first place. There is thus a constant interplay between the preparation of boys for war and the exclusive status of men as soldiers.

According to Goldstein it is the combination of these two categories which explains gender roles during wartime. As he writes: “[t]he gendering of war thus results from the combination of culturally constructed gender roles with real but modest biological differences. Neither alone would solve the puzzle” (6). In his study, Goldstein has identified a number of other reasons which also help us explain the gendered separation of wartime roles. One of these reasons why cultures see combat experience as exclusively belonging to men is linked to the view of war as a test of masculinity. War is seen as an event in which men can show their true manhood and the presence of women in combat forces makes this test of manhood complicated since only men can show their masculinity (Goldstein 6). Women are not supposed to show masculine behaviour and if they want to demonstrate their femininity, then they cannot do this by participating in war. As I will explain in the next section, the true test of femininity is motherhood because when women are mothers they can show their feminine qualities. Just as men are excluded from this test of femininity, women are excluded from the test of masculinity.

Another important reason why societies do not regard women as potential soldiers for wars is the symbolical “affinity between women and peace” (Elshtain 4). Most cultures link men with war and aggressiveness, and women with peace and safety (Goldstein 42). Female citizens are seen as the representatives of peace and it is the male soldiers’ task to protect these women. As Goldstein has written, “[b]ecause of the feminization of noncombat, the presence of women in combat might upset

the male soldiers" (306). Women are supposed to have a "nurturing" (Goldstein 41) and "peaceful nature" (Goldstein 322) and when they participate in violent conflicts, this view is severely contradicted. Moreover, soldiers will feel confused when they find themselves in situations in which they have to kill female soldiers of the enemy, since they have always been taught to protect and not to harm women (Goldstein 306).

### **2.3. Wartime roles for men and women**

Goldstein writes that men's role in wartime is simple: they have to sacrifice themselves by fighting on the battlefield. He notes that there is one problem namely that "killing in war does not come naturally for either gender, yet the potential for war has been universal in human societies" (9). Since men will not go to war to simply kill other men for their own pleasure, with some rare exceptions of course, nations have to find other ways of motivating their men to fight (Goldstein 253). Most men will, for instance, decide to fight in wars in order to protect their nation, to sacrifice themselves for others, to die as a hero, or simply because they had no other choice. One of the primary motivations for men to participate in warfare is to show their masculinity (Goldstein 5-6). He argues that cultures "lin[k] bravery and discipline in war to manhood" (406) to motivate more men to join the war effort. The ideal of masculinity includes bravery, heroism, toughness, strength, skill, endurance and honour, and the place in which men can show that they possess these qualities is in war, or in other kinds of conflict (Goldstein 266-267). In this way, "war becomes a "test of manhood" (Goldstein 5), a rite of passage for boys who want to become men. As I will argue in one of the following pages, women during the First World War played a central role in convincing men to show their true masculinity on the battlefield.

Women's wartime roles, as I have already discussed, are much more diverse than those of men. Even though there is a great diversity in women's wartime roles, there are some traditional female roles that recur in all wars. What all of these traditional roles for women have in common is that they are a form of support for the war, either directly or indirectly.

First of all, women support war by means of their labour which is exploited by the male powers (Goldstein 380). As Goldstein writes, "[i]n every society at war, women workers help sustain both the war effort and the economy behind it "(380). In the First World War, most British women had to work in munitions factories where they directly supported the war effort. These women were called 'Munitionettes' and as becomes clear from recruiting posters, the job which these women did was highly valued. One poster, for instance, depicts a female munitions worker with a soldier in the background. The text above the image says that "on her their lives depend" (see image 1). In another poster a male soldier waves at a female munitions worker and the text reads "these women are doing

their bit" (see image 2). Other women worked as nurses at the front or in the hospitals at home, and their main job was to take care of the wounded soldiers, and to make sure that they could return to the front as soon as possible. There were also women who were part of the Women's Royal Air Force or the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. On the recruiting posters of these two organizations we can read what roles women could play in these organizations. They could for instance be clerks, waitresses, drivers, mechanics, cooks or motor cyclists (see images 3 and 4). Another group of women contributed more indirectly to the war effort. They occupied the jobs that men had previously held, and through their work these women made sure that 'normal' life was still continuing as it did before the war. The so-called 'Land Girls' who were part of the civilian organization the Women's Land Army, for instance, replaced the farmers who were sent to the front and successfully did their job for them. As can be read on a recruitment poster, these women were also engaged in "national service" (see image 5).

Apart from supporting the war by means of work, British women during the First World War also supported the war ideologically. During this war, women in Great Britain were expected to be enthusiastic patriots who supported the war, and who convinced their men to enlist. In an article named "The Call to Arms" which appeared in the *Evening Standard* of 26 August 1914, women were, for instance, instructed in the following way: "To send them cheerfully on their way, and enter fully into their enthusiasms, while minimising their anxieties with regard to those they are leaving behind is a sacred duty which England demands they [women] should perform with the same readiness which she [England] asks of her sons in volunteering for the field" (qtd. in Grayzel, *Identities* 86). It is this image of women persuading men to join the war which was presented in several propaganda posters. In the poster which says "Women of Britain say – "Go!"", this image is clearly illustrated. In this poster two women and a child are standing outside of their house while looking at the soldiers who march away (see image 6). In this image, it becomes clear how women in Great Britain were seen as the supporters of the war since what we see here is two women standing behind the men whom they sent to the front. Another propaganda poster which illustrates women's role in convincing men to go to war is the one in which a mother looks at her son and by means of her hand gesture invites him to go away. The text on this poster reads: "Go! It's your duty lad. Join to-day" (see image 7). While male soldiers were in the war they still received support from the women at home. Goldstein mentions, for instance, that British women munitions workers put small notes of emotional support in the products which they produced and which were sent to the front (307). Another way in which women could emotionally support their men was by sending letters to the front. In these letters women told male soldiers how much they loved them, how proud they were and how important it was that they would keep on fighting. As Martha Hanna has argued, these letters were "essential to the well-being and morale of soldiers" (1). When Vera Brittain's fiancé Roland Leighton left her, for instance, the two used

the time before his crossing to France by “reinforc[ing] the other’s courage with letters” (*Testament of Youth* 115). In this specific case, the arrival of war letters also had a positive effect on the woman at home.

Supporting war is one of the central female roles during wartime, yet this does not mean that in reality women have always conformed to this task. As Goldstein has written, there are numerous examples throughout history in which women oppose war (322). Even though these women form only a small minority (Goldstein 316), it is important to pay attention to their perspective as well. According to Goldstein, women who oppose wars want to protect the peace and family life which they as women represent. These female anti-war activists see fighting as a typically male way of solving conflicts, and instead, they propose another more feminine way of dealing with conflict, namely by means of talking and “mediation” (Goldstein 324). British suffragist and pacifist Helena Swanwick, for instance, wrote that “men make wars, not women” (qtd. in Grayzel, *Identities* 159). These female pacifists believe in the idea that “if you want peace, [you] work for peace” (Goldstein 412), not by means of fighting but by cooperating. At the outbreak of the First World War in Great Britain, it was mainly feminists who formed part of the few peace movements. These women criticized the war and as a consequence, their protests were seen “as dissent and even treason” (Grayzel, *Identities* 157). One example of such a pacifist organization was the International Women’s Committee of Permanent Peace which was founded in April 1915 during the International Women’s Peace Congress that took place in The Hague. This organization still exists today, only under a different name. Important feminists and pacifists such as Aletta Jacobs, Jane Addams, Emily Greene Balch (both of which won the Nobel Peace Prize), and Vera Brittain have been part of this organization. Another well-known supporter of this organization was the British suffragist Sylvia Pankhurst who, as Angela K. Smith writes, “just as many other suffragists, chose the path of pacifism” (“Pankhursts” 104). According to Susan R. Grayzel, these feminist pacifists at the beginning of the twentieth century saw a “connection between male or masculine power and the existence of war” (*Identities* 158). Since they opposed male superior power in society, these feminists claimed that institutions such as war, in which this masculine power clearly manifested itself, needed to be opposed.

However, most of these pacifist groups only existed during the beginning of the war. At the end of 1914, almost “all the major feminist groups of the belligerents had given a new pledge – to support their respective governments” (Goldstein 318). After the first few months of the Great War “[s]uddenly, campaigners for women’s suffrage became avid patriots and organizers of women in support of the war effort” (Goldstein 318). The women who a year earlier had fought for women’s rights and their emancipation from traditional feminine roles, now saw themselves occupying the conventional female domestic roles that they were fervently criticizing a few months before. It is

important to note that from the beginning of the First World War there were already British feminists who did not believe in pacifism, and who supported the war in a traditional female way. Sylvia Pankhurst's mother and sister, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, for instance, were enthusiastic supporters of the war. Angela K. Smith has written that during the First World War these two important feminists "adopted a fervently patriotic stance, supporting their former enemies, the liberal politicians, and campaigning for the war effort through their retitled weekly publication, *Britannia*" ("Pankhursts" 104). In this case, "[t]he outbreak of war in August 1914", indeed "brought to a halt the activities of both militant and constitutional suffragists" (Kent 232). Goldstein has argued that the reason for this feminist support of the war was that "[m]any of these feminists hoped that patriotic support of the war would enhance the prospects for women's suffrage after the war" (318). This hope partially became reality when in 1918, 8.4 million British women over the age of thirty were finally given the vote (Pugh 260).

Another way in which women have supported wars is through the "[f]eminine reinforcement of soldiers' masculinity" (Goldstein 4). As Goldstein argues, "masculinity often depends on an "other" constructed as feminine" (251). In war, it is the task of this female 'other' to encourage the male soldier to show his masculinity. In propaganda posters, images of women were frequently used in this way. An example of this is the poster titled "For the Glory of Ireland" which was published in Dublin in 1915. It is important to remember that gaining support for the war in Ireland was difficult during this time since many Irish nationalists wished to become independent from the United Kingdom. Keith Jeffery has argued that as a consequence, joining the First World War as an Irishman was often presented by Irish nationalists not as helping the British, but as either indirectly helping the Irish, in the hope that the British authorities would reward Ireland for its military contribution to the war with Home Rule, or as directly rescuing their Catholic brothers and sisters in Belgium from the atrocities of the Germans (12). It is this last idea which is illustrated in the Irish recruitment poster of 1915, since what we see here is an Irish woman with a gun in her hands pointing towards a burning Belgian city while asking the man standing in front of her: "Will you go or must I?" (see image 8). By posing her question in this way, the woman challenges the man to show his masculinity. The desired answer to this question is that the man says that he, as a real tough and masculine Irishman, will go to the war in order to protect both the poor Irish family in the background as well as the people in Belgium. Another World War I propaganda poster, which according to Michele J. Shover, also "appealed to men's egos and challenged their masculinity" (482) is an American poster made in 1917, in which a woman is portrayed with the text: "Gee!! I wish I were a man. I'd join the navy". At the bottom of this poster it even reads: "Be a man and do it" (see image 9).

If soldiers are brave and they have signed up for war, women have to praise and admire these men for their courage. Vera Brittain, for instance, wrote in her autobiography that “towards the men [which she nursed] I came to feel an almost adoring gratitude” (165). If, however, men decide to not participate in war then women will publicly shame and humiliate these persons who are no longer considered real men (Goldstein 269). During the First World War in Great Britain, female encouragement of men to show their true masculinity became an essential part of recruiting men for the war. Before conscription started in January 1916, British women played an important role in convincing men to fight (Gullace, “White Feathers” 182). During this early period of the war, it was women who were actively shaming those men who chose not to participate in the war. In the large-scale white feathers campaign, for instance, women handed out white feathers, a symbol of cowardice, to the weak and cowardly men who had not signed up. According to Nicoletta F. Gullace, “[this] practice was widely imitated by women all over the country and continued long after conscription was instated in 1916, creating one of the most persistent memories of the home front during the war” (“White Feathers” 179). Even across the Atlantic Ocean, people knew about this British female movement. In an October 1914 issue of the American magazine *Collier's Weekly*, for instance, a short story titled “The White Weather” appeared. One of the illustrations of this story depicts a woman who puts a white feather into a man’s waistcoat and then tells him: “You coward! Why don’t you enlist?” (see image 10). Goldstein argues that in this case, “[t]he power of shame should not be underestimated” (269). By publicly shaming men who did not fight in the war, women drew attention to the failure of these men’s masculinity as well as their loss of social prestige (Goldstein 269). Since men did not want to be seen as cowards, especially not by women, most men decided to join the war effort during the First World War in order to protect their status as tough and masculine men.

Another central role for women during wartime is to represent the ideals of femininity. Women have to be “Beautiful Soul[s]” (Elshtain xiii) and are, for instance, expected to “remain chaste” (Goldstein 317). As Philomena Goodman has written, during wartime women are seen “as the guardians of the values that men [are] fighting to protect” (87). Whereas for men, war is thus the occasion in which they have to demonstrate their masculinity, women have to show their femininity. The ultimate way in which women can demonstrate their femininity is by means of motherhood since being a mother requires all the typically feminine traits such as calmness, gentleness, empathy and moral pureness. Jean Bethke Elshtain summarizes this when she argues that what war requires of men and women respectively is to be “the Good Soldier and the Good Mother” (xiii). During war, women have to embody the ideal of motherhood and this is possible in a number of ways.

First of all, as mothers women play an essential role “in shaping their sons for war” (Goldstein 309) since they in most cases “control infant care” (Goldstein 309). Jean Bethke Elshtain argues,

however, that women as mothers do not only play an important role in war by teaching their sons to become warriors, but also by giving birth to them in the first place (183). In other words, it is women's reproductive role as mothers which is highly valued during wartime. Susan R. Grayzel writes that "[t]hrough the bodily labor of reproduction, women provided the raw ammunition of war, and, in a variety of public wartime forums, this kind of gender-specific national work was repeatedly underscored" (*Identities* 86). In war, as Elshtain has argued, there is thus a "traditional dichotomy whereby women are seen as the life givers, [and] men as the life takers" (xiii). In some wars, women were even explicitly encouraged to make more babies. Susan R. Grayzel has argued that such promotion of "maternity for national, political ends" (*Identities* 87) existed in Great Britain during the First World War. Because of the large number of casualties in the trenches and the declining birth-rate, British women's "alcohol consumption and sexual practices" (Grayzel, *Identities* 87) were regulated, and only the traditional family which consisted of numerous legitimate children was supported by the government (Grayzel, *Identities* 87). In this case, motherhood was indeed seen as "women's fundamental contribution to the state" (Grayzel, *Identities* 3). According to Susan R. Grayzel, this role of the mother who produces male warriors is what gave women during the First World War an enormous power. She writes that "by refusing to produce future fighters" (*Identities* 2), women could "evad[e] their duty" (*Identities* 2) and this would have had a significant effect on the war. Motherhood gave women "a status equivalent to the soldier" (Grayzel, *Identities* 2) and "ma[d]e them feel that they, too, had an essential part to play in supporting the war" (Grayzel, *Identities* 2). Moreover, for British women during the Great War "motherhood came to represent [...] what soldiering did for men, a gender-specific experience meant to provide social unity and stability during a time of unprecedented upheaval" (Grayzel, *Identities* 87).

It is important to bear in mind that women did not necessarily have to be mothers in order to represent motherhood. One of the most important roles associated with motherhood was nurturing and it is this role which women without children could occupy as well. The clearest example of this are those women who work as nurses, and who are seen as "surrogate mothers" (Goldstein 312). Nurses are the epitome of motherhood since they take care of the wounded male soldiers, who in some cases are so dependent on their female nurses that they become almost like babies. During the First World War, thousands of British nurses worked in hospitals near the battlefield or at home in Great Britain ("*Volunteers*", *British Red Cross*). In one well-known propaganda poster, the image of the nurse as mother is clearly illustrated (see image 11). In this image, which shows clear resemblances to the pietà motif in Christian art, a Red Cross nurse is holding a wounded soldier in her hands as if he is a baby. The soldier is, for instance, much smaller than the nurse and his head is located near her breast. The text underneath this image, which reads: "The Greatest Mother in the World", again shows how nurses

were seen as mothers. In another British propaganda poster, the nurse is not only depicted as a mother who cares for her children, but, because of her wings, she is also represented as an angel (see image 12). Michele J. Shover has argued that in these posters which depict female nurses, traditional roles are inverted. Whereas normally, propaganda images portray men as the strong heroes who protect the vulnerable women, in this case “the figure of strength is the woman while the men – bandaged and passive – are clearly the helpless, appealing figures of sympathy” (477).

During war, women represent the ideal of pure of tranquil femininity and as a consequence women in war are linked to peace and safety. Men, on the other hand, represent aggression, and the battlefield, in contrast to the homeland, becomes a place of violence, misery and hell. The result of this is the contrast between a violent battlefield which involves men, and a safe “feminine “normal” sphere of experience, from which war is separated psychologically” (Goldstein 304). Male soldiers fight on this battlefield in order to protect “a place called home or normal or peacetime” (Goldstein 301). This feminine peaceful place of home needs to be separated from the hellish battlefield so that it can “serve as a kind of metaphysical sanctuary for traumatized soldiers” (Goldstein 403) who return home, and who want to find some sort of escape and safety with their women. Goldstein has observed that as a motivation to fight soldiers often take pictures of their wives or sweethearts with them to the battlefield in order to be reminded of the peaceful place of home that they are protecting (305). What this example illustrates is that the presence of a woman in a photograph can bring some peace and romantic escape from the battlefield. The women who were physically present near the battlefield also represented peace and safety for men. Goldstein writes for instance that “[p]art of the power of army nurses comes from the message that, if one is in the presence of women, one is no longer in combat but connected with home” (308). When a male soldier was with a female nurse he once again felt safe and after the care of these “heaven-sent girls” (Goldstein 308), soldiers once again felt ready to go to the battlefield.

Protecting their own country thus essentially meant protecting the women at home who represent the nation’s peace. There is one example of the First World War which illustrates the importance of protecting women in war rhetoric. In this example it is not about protecting the women at home in Great Britain, but the ones who live in Belgium. During the First World War, the German army committed numerous atrocities in Belgium. British media described the German mistreatment and killing of thousands of Belgian civilians as “The Rape of Belgium”. In British propaganda, this horrible behaviour of German soldiers was used to convince more men to enlist. The focus in these propaganda images and stories was mainly on how horribly German soldiers had treated women and babies. Nicoletta F. Gullace has for instance observed how “hundreds of patriotic publicists [...] described in lurid detail such random horrors as a governess hanged “stark naked and mutilated,” the

bayonetting of a small baby at Corbeek Loo, and the “screams of dying women” raped and “horribly mutilated” by German soldiers accused variously of cutting off the feet, hands, or breasts of their innocent and hapless victims” (*Blood* 18-19). By concentrating on the abuse of these weaker civilians, British propagandists wanted to convince men to join the war in order to protect these Belgian women and children from the brutal Germans. In one propaganda poster titled “Remember Belgium: Enlist today”, a British soldier is standing in a heroic position and behind him are depicted a woman and her child who are fleeing from a burning Belgian village (see image 13). The British soldier will protect these two persons, and what this poster asks from its male viewers, who have not yet enlisted, is to do the same.

At the same time, however, soldiers did not only protect the nation’s women, but they also protected one symbolical woman in particular namely the mother country. As Goldstein writes, “[t]he nation is often gendered female” (369) and it is this woman who needs to be protected from brutal exterior forces. In one American World War One propaganda poster we can see, for instance, a female personification of the United States of America who instead of standing upright is depicted in a low and weak position. The stern-looking man standing behind her points towards the viewer and says “It’s up to you. Protect the nation’s honour” (see image 14). Another American propaganda poster in which we can see a woman in danger and in need of protection from a brutal man, is the one which was produced in the U.S.A. in 1917 and which was titled “Destroy this mad brute. Enlist” (see image 15). In this image we can see a savage German ape-like monster with a helpless woman in his hands. In this poster the message to men is the same as in the previous one: help the army to protect this woman by enlisting now.

One last important role for women during and after wars is to mourn the dead soldiers and to remember “the heroic myths of men” (Goodman 1). Jean Bethke Elshtain has argued that the image of the weeping woman is one of the main female identities in war (3). Susan R. Grayzel agrees with this when she argues that cultures see “women as the chief mourners in national and local ceremonies of commemoration” (*Identities* 10). This, as she continues, “demonstrates that the grieving mother became a potent vehicle for the expression of collective memory and sorrow” (*Identities* 10). During and after the First World War, it was British women who had survived the war, who “engaged in acts of recovery, restoration, and remembrance” (Grayzel, *Identities* 226). They recovered the bodies of dead soldiers, made sure they were buried if possible, and they build and unveiled monuments for these men. In the private sphere, these “bereaved” (Grayzel, *Identities* 231) women expressed their grief, and they mourned the soldiers whom they knew personally. According to Grayzel, these “monuments and rituals [...] made the mourning mother a bearer of memory for the nation of her fallen son” (*Identities* 226). In the St. Saviours War Memorial in Southwark, London, there is, for

instance, a woman depicted on one side of the stone on which stands a brave male soldier (see image 16). According to the official description, “th[is] mourning figure of a woman plays homage to the fallen, and is symbolic of the grief of the present generation” (qtd. in Grayzel, *Identities* 232). In another memorial which is located in Eccleston Park, Liverpool, it is again the woman in the statue who represents the grief of the nation and who remembers the brave actions of the male soldiers (see image 17). The woman in this statue is holding a branch of laurel with which she can praise the achievements of the male soldier standing above her. The inscription on this statue reads: “The Laurels Of The Sons Are Watered From The Hearts Of The Mothers” and this perfectly illustrates women’s role as post-war mourners. It is through women’s tears and remembrance that the heroic deeds of the male soldiers who fought in the Great War, are kept alive in our collective memory.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

In this part of my thesis I have taken a closer look at Joshua S. Goldstein and other scholars’ ideas on gender and war. As I have discussed in these pages, there are clear traditional beliefs about men and women’s roles in wartime, and these have not changed much throughout history or between different cultures. Even though the First World War was one of the first real modern wars, this conflict was still gendered in the traditional way. Tens of thousands of male soldiers were sent to the European battlefields, and British women stayed at home where they would enthusiastically support the war. At the same time, however, the conventional female wartime role as supporter of the war was also being criticized by feminists who refused to support the war, and instead presented themselves as pacifists. During the First World War, there was thus acceptance as well as critique of the traditional gendered wartime roles that had existed for centuries.

In the following three chapters, I will analyse this double reaction of British women to traditional war roles, in the poetry that was written by female writers about the First World War. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the main roles for women in wartime that I have discussed in this part. In the third chapter, I will focus on the image of the home front, including its female inhabitants, as an ideal place of peace, stability and safety, which needed to be protected by the male soldiers on the violent battlefields. In chapter four, I will discuss women’s role as economic and patriotic supporters of the war. In the fifth chapter, I will pay attention to the traditional role of the nurturing and loving mother in women’s poems. The role of the female mourner will not be discussed in detail in this thesis, since many studies have already been dedicated to this topic.

### **3. Male and female spaces: the home front versus the battlefield**

In the previous chapter, I have explained that during wartime there is usually a clear division between men and women's roles. This involves a traditional spatial separation between men and women. The battlefield is defined as a male space and the home front is considered a female space. This gendered division between the battle zone and the home front as respectively male and female spaces is something which many historical scholars have discussed in their works (e.g. Meyer 2002; Lee 2008; Grayzel 2014). In my analysis of the home front and the battlefield, I will of course focus on Great Britain as the homeland. With regards to the battle zone, I will only focus on the battlefields in France and Belgium during the First World War since this is the place where most action took place, and because of the fact that most of the poems that I will investigate deal with these battlefields on the Western Front.

I will begin this chapter by first taking a closer look at theories on space and gender. In this theoretical part, I will mostly draw on the works of British cultural geographer Doreen Massey and American sociologist Daphne Spain. I will use their most influential works on gender and space, namely Doreen Massey's book *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) and Daphne Spain's work *Gendered Spaces* (1992). In this discussion, it will become clear that the gendered division of the fronts in the First World War was a demonstration of the traditional view that men belong in the public sphere and women in the domestic one.

In my analysis of the poems, I will investigate how female poets responded to this gendered division of the fronts. In this part, I will not only consider the battlefield and the home front as respectively male and female spaces because of the presence of either gender in it. After all, there were also women near the battlefield and men who stayed at home. Instead, I will investigate how these two spaces were defined as having masculine and feminine qualities. I will argue that while the battlefield was, for instance, described as a place of male action and toughness, the home front was a place that represented female tranquillity, beauty and safety. In my analysis I will specifically focus on the representation of the landscape. In order to explore these poems' depiction of nature in Great Britain on the one hand, and France and Belgium on the other, I will use the ideas of ecofeminist theory as a theoretical framework. Ecofeminist scholars have written extensively on the relationship between gender and the natural environment, and therefore this theoretical base will help me explore the connection between gender and nature in both spaces.

In the second part of my analysis of the poems, I will focus on the relationship between both fronts, and what happened in women's war poetry when men or women transgressed the traditional border that divided them. The reason why I will analyse this crossing of the border is the fact that the

First World War was one of the first wars in which the division between the two fronts was not that clear anymore. Whereas in previous wars there was a strict line between home and the battlefield, men fought on the battlefield and women were kept safe at home where life continued as normal, in World War One this line was not that clear anymore (Grayzel, *Identities* 11). Instead of being a place of safety, the home front was now also in danger because of air attacks. According to Susan R. Grayzel, “[a]erial warfare against civilians made it impossible to sustain the illusion that the home front and war front existed in entirely separate realms. It literally placed the home and its inhabitants on the front line” (“Baby” 129). Moreover, as Grayzel writes, both fronts were not seen as isolated anymore because of the large amount of exchange that took place between them, not only in the form of men and women travelling to the other side of the English Canal but also through letters and newspapers (*Identities* 11-12). In the second part of the analysis, I will focus on what happened in women’s war poems when men entered the female space of the home or when women entered the battle zone. More specifically, I will pay attention to what effect this had on the poetic definition of that space as male or female. As will become clear from my analysis, the presence of men on the home front or of women near the battlefield in women’s war poems could bring either masculine or feminine qualities to that already gender-defined place.

### **3.1. Theory on gender and space**

In her influential work *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), British cultural geographer Doreen Massey writes that spaces in our societies are used to express social power relations (2). In other words, the place where you live and work defines “one’s place in the world” (Massey 1). The same idea was expressed by French philosopher Michel Foucault who argued that “[a] history of spaces” (149) is essentially “the history of powers” (149). Doreen Massey specifically focuses on how spatial separation can represent class and gender differences. In her book *Gendered Spaces* (1992), American scholar Daphne Spain has also argued that spaces express power relations between men and women:

Throughout history and across cultures, architectural and geographic spatial arrangements have reinforced status differences between women and men. [...] Women and men are spatially segregated in ways that reduce women’s access to knowledge and thereby reinforce women’s lower status relative to men’s. “Gendered spaces” separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege (3)

Both Doreen Massey and Daphne Spain refer to the traditional dichotomy in Western culture between the private and public sphere as respectively belonging to men and women. In their studies

on the relationship between space and gender in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they have argued that in terms of space this general distinction resulted in a symbolic association between men and the workplace and the global, and women and the home and the local (Massey 179; Spain 7). Moreover, Doreen Massey writes that there is an important difference between the mobility of men and women. Whereas men could easily cross the boundary between both spheres, for example when they return to their families at the end of the day, women's mobility is severely limited. According to Massey, "[t]he attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity" (179). Any female "escape from the spatial confines of the home is in itself a threat" (Massey 179) to the social order of a patriarchal system. As Philomena Goodman writes, "[w]omen going out to work and women living alone away from their communities [were] seen as problematic" (18).

For a long time, this distinction has been imposed on Western societies. In Victorian England, for instance, "[t]he public sphere of business, politics and professional life" (Gorham 4) belonged to men, while "[t]he private sphere of love, the emotions and domesticity" (Gorham 4) was considered female. However, and this is one of the main points of Massey's theory, these gendered spaces are not fixed and are always open to change. As Massey writes, "[t]he identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple" (5). Daphne Spain writes that one of the ways in which traditional gendered spaces were contested was by allowing women to enter the workplace, something which has become normal nowadays (7). During the First World War, however, the public space was still considered as exclusively belonging to men. Even though women were temporarily allowed to enter the male workplace as munitions workers, for instance, the public place of the battlefield was still a no-go zone for women. As Janet Lee has argued, World War One still contained the traditional "separation between "public" masculine battlefield and "private" feminine home front" (20).

### **3.2. The female home front versus the male battlefield**

#### **3.2.1. The safe and beautiful home front versus the dangerous and tough battlefield**

In women's First World War poetry, the home front is described as a place that represents the traditional ideals of women, namely love, tranquillity, harmony and safety. This is related to conventional views of the home as "a woman's place [that is] a source of stability, reliability and authenticity" (Massey 180). As Doreen Massey writes, "[h]ome is where the heart is [...] and where the woman (mother, lover-to-whom-you-will-one-day-return) is also" (180). Massey has written that "the identities of 'woman' and of the 'home-place' are intimately tied-up with each other" (180) and in the poetical constructions of the home front this connection is clearly visible. The home front is

represented as an idealized place with a woman figure at its centre, and it is this image of a safe, romanticised and “stable symbolic centre” (Massey 180) which frequently returned in women’s war poetry.

Lilian M. Anderson’s poem “Leave in 1917” (1930), for instance, describes what happened when soldiers returned home to their women. In this poem, a soldier is travelling home and during this journey he is constantly thinking about his horrible experience in the trenches. He thinks for instance about “hidden forts and hidden camps, / of furnaces down-slaked to darkness, towns / crouched slumbering beneath the threat of death” (11-13). However, as soon as he is near his house, happy memories about his home country enter his mind. When the train rides into Devonshire he thinks: “Here was his England, stripped of mail and weapons, / child-sweet and maiden-gentle. Here was Spring, / her feet frost-bright among the daffodils” (48-50). His house is described as having “milk-white walls” (56), and is surrounded by “[a]pple-trees” (58), “a foam of flowers” (58), “lambs” (63) and “robins [that] came for crumbs” (53). When he arrives home his wife stands waiting for him and as soon as the lovers are together there is only pure happiness in the soldier’s thoughts:

Here was the slated threshold of his home,  
and here his lighted hearth; here daffodils  
shone amber in the firelight; here the breath  
of violets and rosy hyacinths  
clung heavy to the blue and bitter incense  
of lately-kindled logs. And sweet, sweet, sweet  
the finches singing in the orchard dusk! (83-89)

For this soldier then, home is a safe haven that can be contrasted to the horrors of the trenches. This is related to what Wojciech Klepuszewski describes as the function of the pastoral homeland image, namely to “serv[e] as a counter-balance to the horror of war” (143). The pastoral quality of this poem is clearly visible in the above-mentioned passage which describes the simple and rural life, surrounded by birds and flowers, which the soldier’s wife leads. In this poem, England indeed becomes “a place of redemption and healing” (108) as Stacy Gillis has written, since the soldier completely forgets about his traumatic experiences in the trenches as soon as he is with his wife. When he returns to the battlefield the memory of his peaceful stay at home is what will keep his spirits up, as becomes clear from the following words: “Like bees that garner sunshine-golden honey / against the barren winter, Sheringham [the soldier] / garnered his memories against the morrow” (80-82).

Eileen Newton's "Last Leave" (1918) is another poem in which it is specifically the house in England which is the place of safety. In this poem, a soldier returns home to his wife and it is in this place where he finds calmness and comfort. Whereas outside of the house, there are dangerous storms, inside the house, there is safety:

Peace, and content, and soul-security –  
 These are within. Without, the waste is wild  
 With storm-clouds sweeping by in furious flight,  
 And ceaseless beating of autumnal rain  
 Upon our window pane. (6-10)

In Cicily Fox Smith's poem "The Convalescent" (1916), the image of the home as a safe place that the soldier can return to is also present. In this poem, a male soldier is recovering from his wounds in a hospital in Great Britain and despite the fact that he receives good care, he still dreams of the place where his "eart" (4), "missis" (25) and "kids" (26) are, namely at home in "'Enry Street" (4). The poem does not define where this street is located, but it is most likely to be in a part of England in which h-dropping occurs, for instance in London. As becomes clear from the soldier's thoughts, this nostalgic image of his safe home has helped him through his tough time in the trenches:

The sheffoneer we saved to buy, the clock upon the wall,  
 The pictures an' the almanac, the china dogs an' all,  
 I've thought about it many a time, my little 'ome complete,  
 When in Flanders, far away from 'Enry Street.

It's 'elped me through the toughest times – an' some was middlin' tough –  
 The 'ardest march was not so 'ard, the roughest not so rough;  
 It's 'elped me keep my pecker up in victory an' defeat,  
 Just to think about my 'ome in 'Enry Street. (9-16)

In these poems there is thus a clear contrast between the female home front as a place which expresses feminine qualities such as peace, safety, virtue, hope and love, and the male battlefield as a place in which these characteristics are missing. In the trenches there is only danger, death, toughness

and horror. This is described, for instance, in Muriel Elsie Graham's poem "The Battle of the Swamps" (1930). In this poem, the "sheltered homeland" (9) is contrasted to the "mud-fouled trench[es]" (6), "[a] tragic land where little that's sweet or sane survives" (3). In soldiers' poetry, the same contrast was present. One example of this can be found in Edward Thomas' poetry. In his poem "Home" (1916), the soldier's time in the trenches is described as "an evil dream" (36). The speaker of this poem explains that all soldiers experienced "homesick[ness]" (30), and in another poem, also titled "Home" (1916), Thomas illustrates what this image of home, which the soldiers longed for, was exactly. In this second poem, the speaker describes the home as a place of safety and comfort, just as women poets did. The house is, for instance, "pleasant" (11) and "calm" (9), and it "welcome[s]" (7) the soldier. Moreover, there are birds, such as a "thrush" (13), who are singing for him. Men's poetry thus contained the same contrasting image of the home versus the battlefield that was present in women's poetry. The difference, however, is that men's poems mainly focus on the horrible description of the Western front, one clear example of this, which I will discuss later on, is Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917). Women's poems, on the other hand, tend to focus more on pastoral and peaceful descriptions of the homeland. In other words, each of them paid more attention in their poetry to the place that they were most familiar with.

The poems which I have just discussed contributed to the dichotomy between the home front and the battlefield as either pastoral places with beautiful landscapes, or as horrible places full of death and emptiness. For the male soldiers in men and women's poems, the safe home front becomes an important space: it is either the place that they can physically return to when they want to feel the calmness and serenity that the home front represents, or it is a place that exists in their dreams as a happy, idealistic and peaceful memory which will offer them some sort of escape from the horrors of the trenches. As Philomena Goodman has written, "[h]ome as a place, as a 'physical' sense of belonging, inspired loyalty, provoked nostalgia and was longed for. It offered a source of stability – it was a male morale booster" (19).

### **3.2.2. Ecofeminist theory**

Whereas the home front was thus presented as a place of safety, or as it says in Lady Margaret Sackville's poem "Ora Pro Nobis" (1916), "a safe corner of a world in flame" (10), the battlefield, where more than 8.5 million soldiers died ("Source List", *Necrometrics*), was full of danger. One way in which we can observe this difference is by taking a closer look at the representation of the landscape in women's war poetry. While the home front in their poems contains beautiful landscapes with growing flowers, the fields of Flanders and France only have destruction and barrenness.

This male destruction of the environment is one of the main interests of ecofeminist scholars. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has written, ecofeminism is the combination of feminism and “deep ecology” (35), a specific field of study that focuses on human intervention in the natural environment, especially in a negative way. According to ecofeminist theory there is a connection between the male oppression of women that is present in patriarchal societies, and the domination of nature (Radford Ruether 35). In both cases the oppressor is male and the oppressed is the inferior female. In order to understand why the oppressed is female in the case of the destruction of the natural environment, it is important to understand that nature is traditionally considered female (Radford Ruether 36). This symbolic connection between women and nature can, for instance, be observed in the phrases ‘mother nature’ and ‘mother earth’. Just as nature, women’s bodies are fertile and they can produce new life. As Radford Ruether writes, “[t]he earth, as the place from which plant and animal life arises, becomes linked with the bodies of women from which babies emerge” (39). Culture, on the other hand, which is related to civilization and rationality, is considered masculine. Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that this “identification of women with nature and men with culture is both ancient and widespread” (37). The traditional view here is that nature and women are wild and need to be controlled by the male representatives of a civilized and controlling culture (Radford Ruether 40). Throughout history, as Radford Ruether has written, the domination of women and their bodies has always been accompanied by the exploitation and control of nature. Radford Ruether refers, for instance, to the early agricultural societies in which both women and animals were dominated and domesticated (39).

Ecofeminists thus see men as dominators of women, whether this be in the form of actual women or in the case of nature as a woman. According to Joshua S. Goldstein, war, which is seen as the ultimate site of male power, “is an extension of the aggressive and exploitative relationships embodied in sexism, racism, and the “rape” of the environment” (47). In wartime, the domination of nature and women is more prominent than in normal times. Women are confined to the home front where they have to play a secondary role, as opposed to the heroic male soldiers who fight in the battlefield and who receive all the honour. Nature is also the victim of the destructiveness of war. We are all familiar with the numerous bombings of cities like Rotterdam, London, Paris and Dresden during the two World Wars, but as the battlefields of the First World War show, nature was often also destroyed. During the Great War, the natural landscapes of France and Belgium were transformed into muddy trenches where no natural life existed anymore. As we can see in a photograph taken by Australian photographer Frank Hurley and a painting made by British war artist Paul Nash, the battlefields were bare lands full of dead bodies, limbs, rats, slime, mud and dead trees (see images 18 & 19).





In her poem “Field Ambulance in Retreat” (1914), May Sinclair uses agricultural language to indicate the infertility of the trenches. In this poem she writes that while the wagons of the few farmers that are left in Flanders are “piled with corn from the harvest” (9), the only harvest from the battlefield are the dead bodies of men. May Sinclair herself worked in the Field Ambulance Corps of the British Red Cross (Reilly 137), and in this poem she describes the moment when in the place “where the piled corn-wagons went, our dripping / Ambulance carries home / Its red and white harvest from the fields” (15-17).

While during the war the battlefields were barren landscapes, after the war, when the battlefronts are turned into mass cemeteries, nature again starts to grow. In Elizabeth Daryush’s post-war poem “Flanders Fields” (1930), for instance, the graves in Belgium, “the fields of agony” (8), are again filled with “[p]oppies bright” (11), “unfading green” (4), and “[g]lorious [...] rose[s]” (2). It is the same kind of image which is present in John McCrae’s famous poem “In Flanders Fields” (1917), in which he writes: “In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row,” (1-2). In these places there is thus a contrast between the presence of death below the surface and the growth of nature on top. As becomes clear from Vera Brittain’s personal poem “Perhaps” (1916), it is this growth of nature which represented the return of hope after the war. Her fiancé Roland Leighton has died and even though this will have a lasting impact on her life, the sun that again starts to shine does give her some hope for the future:

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,  
 And I shall see that still the skies are blue,  
 And feel once more I do not live in vain,  
 Although bereft of You. (1-4)

In Sara Teasdale’s poem “Spring in War-Time” (1916), the speaker offers a different, more negative, attitude towards the growth of nature after war. In this poem, the speaker wonders how nature dares to bloom in a world which is in grief. He or she feels that it is highly inappropriate for nature to start growing again when the whole world is still in mourning:

I feel the Spring far off, far off,  
 The faint far scent of bud and leaf-  
 Oh how can Spring take heart to come  
 To a world in grief,

## Deep grief? (1-5)

In "A Girl's Song" (1918), Irish poet Katharine Tynan writes more generally about how after the war there will once again be "living green" (4) on the soldiers' graves in France:

The Spring will come by Meuse and Marne,

The birds be blithesome in the tree.

I heap the stones to make his cairn

Were many sleep as sound as he (17-20)

Even though nature has returned to these fields, death is still not far away. Tynan describes, for instance, how the roses thank their colour to the dead men's blood:

Some brown French girl the rose will wear

[...]

Nor wonder why it is so red.

His blood is in the rose's veins, (5-9)

What is interesting here is that this image of a growing flower connected to a dead man's body is also present in a famous poem from a male soldier: Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches" (1916). In this poem, which takes place at the battlefield, he describes the "[p]oppies whose roots are in man's veins / Drop, and are ever dropping" (23-24). According to Matt Simpson, Rosenberg uses this image to connect "the poppy and the fragility of men's lives" (135). Both are the victim of war since both die, or "drop" (24), by the thousands each day.

When we compare the representation of nature in men and women's war poetry, it becomes clear that whereas in women's poems, the contrast is either spatial (the British home front versus the French and Flemish battlefields) or chronological (before, during and after the war on the battlefield), in men's poetry the contrast is between the battlefield and the space behind the front lines. An excellent example of this is Wilfred Owen's "Spring Offensive" (1917). In this poem, a group of soldiers is located "against the shade of a last hill" (1). In this place, which is not far away from the trenches, there is "long grass" (8), a "May breeze" (9), "herb and heather" (29), and the "sun" (25). Moreover, the men are "lying easy [and] were at ease" (2) in these "warm field[s]" (14). This almost pastoral image disappears when the soldiers run towards the battle scene. They leave "the green slopes" (32) behind

them and they enter the “fury of hell” (36) where “fiends and flames / With superhuman inhumanities” (42-43) are. Similarly, in Siegfried Sassoon’s poem “The Rank Stench of Those Bodies Haunts Me Still” (1916), there is also a green space behind the trenches, where soldiers relax before going to battle. Sassoon describes this camp as “a green, trenchless land” (3) with “grass” (40) and “[w]ide, radiant water” (6). Just as was the case in Owen’s poem, the place full of nature is not far away from the battlefield. In Sassoon’s poem, the soldiers are only “[t]welve miles from battering guns” (4). The battlefield is even so close to the peaceful place of nature, that the speaker can still “smell the battle” (9). Whereas in women’s poems, growing nature was thus far away from the trenches on the Western Front, in soldiers’ poems this was not the case.

### **3.3. The relationship between the two fronts**

#### **3.3.1. Crossing the border between the home front and the battle zone**

Until now the male space of the battlefield and the female space of the home front in First World War poetry have been analysed as symbolical separate places which have either masculine or feminine qualities. In reality, however, these spaces were not seen as separate and isolated. Instead, exchange between these two places took place on a large scale during each day of the war. Moreover, both spaces were not defined by the exclusive presence of men or women. It is true that women were not allowed on the battlefield, but they were still able to get very close to the action when they worked in the field hospitals, for instance. The home front, on the other hand, also knew the presence of men who were either on leave as soldiers or who, as noncombatants, were simply too old or too young to fight. As I will demonstrate in this part, the result of the presence of men in female spaces and women in male spaces, in women’s war poems, was that these gendered poetical spaces took over some of the characteristics of the other gendered space.

##### **3.3.1.1. Men in female spaces**

In the analysis of Lilian M. Anderson’s poem “Leave in 1917”, a male soldier returned to the home front and when he was in this place, he could enjoy the safety and peace which it offered. However, some poems illustrate that the presence of men on the home front could also form a threat to the peace that it represented. During the First World War, German air attacks frequently took place in Great Britain and this meant that the home front was not entirely safe. In Nancy Cunard’s poem “Zeppelins” (1921), an air attack on Great Britain is described by the poem’s speaker. As it says in the following lines, it was mostly the people from the lower classes whose houses were bombed:

The fires flamed up and burnt the serried town,  
 Most where the sadder, poorer houses were;  
 Death followed with proud feet and smiling stare,  
 And the mad crowds ran madly up and down (4-7)

Despite the damage that such air attacks caused to the safety of British cities, Viviane Verne's poem "Kensington Gardens" (1915) suggests that these attacks did not form a major threat to England's safety since peace would soon be restored again. In her poem she describes Kensington Gardens in London, one day after the city was bombed and the "babes below [were seen] as sacrifice" (28). The park, which is surrounded by London's urban environment, is full of "summer grass" (1), "radiant rose and ever-greens" (18), "[l]overs smiling" (3) and "[c]hildren playing" (5). As it says in the poem itself, this pastoral view of the park can be contrasted to what happened the night before when the city was in danger:

Sitting here on summer morn,  
 With the birds and babes at play,  
 Who could dream that sky was torn  
 Yesternight – with hellish spray. (29-32)

### 3.3.1.1. Women in male spaces

Just as soldiers could enter the female space of the home front in women's war poetry, either as a soldier on leave or as a pilot who would bomb the cities, in which case they would transport the male danger of the battlefield to England, female characters could also enter the male space of the battlefield in women's poems, and in this case they would add feminine qualities to the poetic representation of the male battle zone. As I have argued before, women at the Western front were not allowed into the space of the battlefield. The specific place that I thus want to focus on is the space behind the trenches where women worked as nurses, ambulance drivers etc. This place is described in women's poems as a sort of liminal space in between the home front and the actual battlefield. The consequence of this was that this place was represented as having both feminine and masculine characteristics. This is perfectly illustrated in the images of field hospitals which frequently return in the poetry of Vera Brittain, someone who worked as a nurse in the military hospitals of London, France and Malta (Reilly 131). In one of her longer poems "The German Ward" (1917), she describes how the

field hospitals near the battlefield were liminal spaces that had both characteristics of the male battlefield and the female home front. The military hospital on the front was thus a female space within the male space of action and warfare. In her description of a field hospital, where there are mainly wounded German soldiers, Brittain directs our attention to the horrors which she saw there:

When the years of strife are over and my recollection fades

Of the wards wherein I worked the weeks away,

[...]

I shall see the pallid faces and the half-suspicious eyes,

I shall hear the bitter groans and laboured breath,

And recall the loud complaining and the weary tedious cries,

And sights and smells of blood and wounds and death (1-8)

This specific passage not only makes us aware of the horrors of field hospitals, it also tells us something about the monotony of nursing work. This is illustrated by the alliteration used in the line “Of the wards wherein I worked the weeks away” (2). Just as the consonant sound ‘w’ is repeated, the work which female nurses did was also a constant repetition that seemed to have no end.

The battlefield and the hospital in Brittain’s poem do not only share the presence of death and blood. The hospital where this nurse works also contains the same kind of chaos that was present in the trenches. The difference, however, is that in this hospital there is still hope, love, and some sense of calmness. The second title of the poem is also “*Inter Arma Caritas*”, a Latin phrase which translates to ‘In war, charity’. There is indeed a war going on in the background, a war which directly influences life in the hospitals, but what the poem makes clear is that this specific place still contains some peace and “human mercy” (21). That this is caused by the presence of female nurses becomes clear from the following lines:

I shall see the Sister standing, with her form of youthful grace,

And the humour and the wisdom of her smile,

[...]

And how the dying enemy her tenderness would find

Beneath her scornful energy of will (13-20)

In Brittain's poem, the field hospitals near the front thus become female places of love and relative peace, right in the middle of the male space of danger, battle and action. This is illustrated in the following two lines:

I shall always see the vision of Love working amidst arms

In the ward wherein the wounded prisoners lay (27-28)

### **3.3.2. The border between the two fronts**

Even though there was a large amount of exchange between Great Britain and the European mainland, many men and women still felt that there was a wall between both worlds. This imaginary wall between the male and female spaces of war features frequently in women's war poetry. In the following two discussions, I will focus on how this wall represented not only the line between safety and danger, something which, as I will argue, was experienced both in a positive and negative way, but also the lack of understanding between male soldiers and those at home, something which was caused by this imaginary wall.

#### **3.3.2.1. The line between safety and danger: feeling locked up or protected?**

Despite the fact that the home front could also be a potential target of German air bombs, women's poems continued to represent England as a place of safety. For male soldiers, the safety that the home front offered was a welcome escape from the horror of the trenches. For women, however, this safety could also be experienced in a negative way. Some of the female characters in women's war poems enjoyed living in a safe homeland, for instance the woman in May O'Rourke poem "The Minority: 1917" (1918) who during the war stays at home where each day she "curls her darkened lashes, [and] manicures / Her scanted hands" (1-2), but others were rather dissatisfied. While British men were risking their lives at the front, they had to sit calmly at home where they had to accept their passive role as on-lookers of male action. The safety at the home front for them meant being locked up in their homes where they were excluded from the real action. In Nora Bomford's poem "Drafts" (1918), the female speaker writes about the contrast between the male and female experience in the following way: "They go to God-knows-where, with songs of Blighty, / While I'm in bed, and ribbons in my nightie" (9-10). She does not want to sit at home where she will be "[s]o dreadfully safe" (17) and where she will live "a life of physical normality" (16) while men are dying for her on the battlefields. She wants to intervene.

The same feeling of unease with the imposed order to stay at home and live a safe life while men fight on a dangerous battlefield, exists in the poem "On the Porch" (1916) by Harriet Monroe. This poem starts with a female speaker who is safely locked up in her house while outside the rain, "[t]he seas of war" (10), is falling from the sky:

As I lie roofed in, screened in,  
 From the pattering rain,  
 The summer rain –  
 As I lie  
 Snug and dry,  
 And hear the birds complain (1-6)

The image of the complaining birds is important here since it suggests that the woman is in a privileged position: while she is safe, the birds outside become wet. It is almost as if the birds are jealous of her safety. That the woman is not completely satisfied with her position in the house becomes clear in the lines when she mentions all the action that is taking place outside of her house. There is for instance "[t]he army proudly swinging / under gay flags" (18-19). While these things "wash" (31) over her house, she "lie[s] roofed in, screened" (33), excluded from all the action.

This theme of powerlessness returns in many of the poems written by female writers. In these poems the woman is locked up in her position of safety and she can only look at the male action, not intervene. In Pauline Barrington's poem "'Education'" (1918), for instance, a woman is sewing and dreaming while her sons are mock fighting. Even when the sons wound each other, she still remains in her own world and does not interfere:

The day is grey as ashes on the hearth.  
 The children play with soldiers made of tin,  
 While you sew  
 Row after row.  
 ...  
 Your son has shot and wounded his small brother.  
 The mimic battle's ended with a sob,

While you dream

Over your seam. (2-10)

Another thing which is interesting about this poem is that while it shows a strict imaginary wall between the mother and her children, at the same time the domestic setting of the poem demonstrates that the border between the home and the battlefield is blurred. The war, in the form of children's war games, namely enters the domestic sphere of the house. The same idea was present in Jessie Pope's "Socks" (1915). In this poem, a mother is sitting by the fire while knitting socks for her soldier son. The war enters her house through the shouting of the paper boys who inform her of what happened on the Western front: "Hark! The paper-boys again! Wish that shout could be suppressed;" (13-14).

### 3.3.2.1. The imaginary wall as a symbol of the lack of understanding between both worlds

For both male and female poets during the First World War, the wall between the two fronts was also a symbol of the lack of understanding that both men and women had for each other. According to them, this boundary stood for the limits of knowing and understanding each other's experiences. As May Wedderburn Cannan wrote in her poem "Rouen" (1917), the Western front and the rest of the world were separated from each other by "half-closed shutters" (51). Both groups had an idea of what was happening on the other side but their view was limited. This becomes clear in Millicent Sutherland's poem "One Night" (1915). In this poem, a female nurse goes to the shore to ask the moon how life in the trenches is. Of all British women, this nurse is the closest to the actual battlefield, but she still does not know what it is like in the trenches, only the soldiers and the moon know. From its position high in the sky, the moon can oversee everything and it can tell this female nurse what happens on the battlefield:

I asked the moon if creeping round the Zones

She had seen good, or only poor things' bones.

'Pale faces I have seen, unconscious men

Bereft of struggling horror now and then. (5-8)

This example illustrates how there was a wall between the battlefield and the rest of the world, since even the British nurses on the Western front did not fully know what happened to the male soldiers in

the trenches. If they wanted to know, then they had to ask the moon, who acts as a sort of intermediary, for help. Whereas in Nora Bomford's poem there was a wall between England and Europe, in Sutherland's poem the wall stands in a more specific place namely between the trenches and the rest of the world.

Male soldiers often felt that women at home did not know what it was really like at the front because of this imaginary wall. It is this feeling of female misunderstanding of the war which is present in Siegfried Sassoon's "Glory of Women" (1918). Here, Sassoon writes about those women who have idealized views of the war and who are completely ignorant of what really happens at the front. This is illustrated in the following contrast: "O German mother dreaming by the fire, / While you are knitting socks to send your son / His face is trodden deeper in the mud" (12-14). According to men like Sassoon, women only had romanticised and false images of the war. In her poem "From a Trench" (1917), Maud Anna Bell presents the voice of a male soldier who says, for instance, that "There are silly fools at Nottingham / Who think we're here for fun" (20-21). In Elizabeth Daryush's poem "Subalterns" (1934), the contrast between women's romantic view of the war and men's more realistic image is clearly illustrated:

She said to one: 'How glows  
My heart at the hot thought  
Of battle's glorious throes!  
He said: 'For us who fought  
Are icy memories (1-5)

Whereas Daryush's poem does not judge women for their false beliefs of the war, she only contrasts them to men's views, in her poem "The Romancing Poet" (1918), Helen Hamilton does blame women for their romanticising of the war. Nosheen Khan has noted that in this poem, Hamilton, just as Wilfred Owen, asks poets to "realize the tragedy that lurks behind the illusionary façades manufactured by them" (16):

I wish you would refrain  
From making glad romance  
Of this most hideous war.  
It has no glamour (4-7)

According to this poem, women poets' romanticised views of the war are caused by the fact that women do not know what war it is truly like. In order to give more truthful accounts of the war they should try to "get the background right" (20). However, the speaker is also pessimistic about women's abilities to truly understand what is going on at the front:

The blood, the filth, the horrors,  
Suffering on such a scale,  
That you and I, try as we may,  
Can only faintly vision it. (22-25)

The misunderstanding between the two home fronts and the difficulty to imagine and understand what is going on, on the other side is clearly present in this poem. Women poets will never get it right but according to this poem they should at least try to get it "[a] little right" (21). Whereas Helen Hamilton only blames women for the romanticised images that female poets presented of the war, Winifred M. Letts' poem "The Deserter" (1916) also focuses on how men were indirectly involved in the creation of these romantic female images of the war front. In this poem, a male soldier is shot because he does not want to join the war effort. His mother, however, hears a completely different story:

An English bullet in his heart!  
But here's the irony of life, -  
His mother thinks he fought and fell  
A hero, foremost in the strife.  
So she goes proudly; to the strife  
Her best, her hero son she gave.  
Oh well for her she does not know  
He lies in a deserter's grave (25-32)

Men like Sassoon thus criticized women for representing images of the war that were inaccurate and too romantic, but, as Letts' poem implies, sometimes it was men themselves who contributed to the formation of these false ideas on the home front. This same idea exists in Margaret Sackville's poem "Home Again" (1916), which according to Nosheen Khan was "composed out of what

was regarded as the genial attitude characteristic of the average Tommy" (91). In this poem a male soldier tells women more simple and romanticised stories of what happened at the front:

They give us sweets and picture-books  
 and cigarettes and things,  
 And they speaks to us respectful-like as  
 though we all was kings;  
 And they asks us silly questions – but they  
*means* well in their way,  
 So tell them how we fought and fell  
 on such and such a day,  
 And we talks a bit to please them when  
 the ladies come to call:  
*But the things that we have done and*  
*seen they 'aven't seen at all. (1-12)*

The reason why they do not tell women what really happened is because they feel that women would not understand: "We just don't answer what they says: / they wouldn't understand" (23-24). Not only would women not understand the real war stories because they have not been there themselves, the men also feel that women at home are not smart enough to comprehend what goes on at the front:

But it takes a deal o' pluck for that and  
 quite a lot o' brain,  
 And since they haven't got them, well –  
 we simply *can't* explain. (45-48)

The poem seems to agree with the male speaker that some women in Great Britain are not capable of understanding the war because it constantly refers to the ignorance and naivety of the people at home. This happens, for instance, when the poem mentions the patriotic "lots o' people shouting, "Britannia rules the waves," (13-14) without having an idea of what is going on at the front. The soldiers want to

tell these people the real stories of war, but since they are not smart enough to understand, this will cost the soldiers a lot of time and it is not guaranteed that after their explanation people will understand the reality of war. For this reason, the soldiers believe it is not worthwhile to tell the people at home the truth and as a consequence, these people will remain in ignorance: "There's 'eaps to tell them if we could, / but it doesn't seem worth while - / So we 'olds our tongues and tempers" (33-35).

Combat life in Sackville's poem thus becomes an exclusive experience which only those who have been there can understand. As the speaker tells us: "It's waste of breath to talk to folk who / 'aven't *been* in 'Ell;" (27-28). In her analysis of this poem, Nosheen Khan has written that the soldiers who thought like this "fail to realize that this inability to communicate their experiences contributes to the complacency which raises barriers between them and the people at home" (91). In other words, soldiers criticized women for not knowing what life at the front was like in real life and for presenting images of war that were too romanticised, but at the same time they were the ones who denied women the opportunity to really understand the truth of what was going on in France and Flanders, not only by denying them access to the battlefield, but also by telling women romanticised instead of true versions of life in the trenches.

On the other hand, several women poets have shown that not all women were incapable of imagining what life in the trenches was like. These women have demonstrated that they did not all have false, romanticised or 'faintly-visioned' ideas about the war. On the contrary, some of them showed that they understood the horror that was part of reality in the trenches. In her anonymously published poem "From a Trench" (1917), which was written from a male perspective and which I have already discussed, Maud Anna Bell shows, for instance, that women did know what the reality of war was. As Claire Buck has argued, "Bell's appropriation of the male combatant's voice allows her to both scrutinize the capacity of the civilian to imagine successfully the experience of the combatant and to enact her own ability to do so" ("Elegy" 441). Bell's poem, just like Muriel Elsie Graham's previously discussed "The Battle of the Swamps" (1930), presents an image of the battlefield that is not romantic or heroic at all, but which stresses the horrible conditions of the trenches. Margaret Sackville's poem "The Pageant of War" (1916) also shows how in some cases women could see the dark reality behind the romantic visions of war. In this poem a woman, along with many other women and civilians, is looking at the soldiers who are marching out of town. Whereas the other women are waving and shouting at the heroic soldiers, the speaker sees what is behind this pageant of war. While others only see the men walking on a white road, she sees how the whiteness of the road represents the "trampled bones" (147) of the men who will die in the war.

Through their poems, these women poets thus criticized those men who believed that women like them, because they stayed at home or behind the frontlines, could not possibly understand what war was truly like. In their imagination, they made the leap across the border between the two fronts, and based on the stories they heard and read about the trenches, for instance in newspapers, letters or of course in soldiers' poems, they successfully imagined what it was like at the Western front. In the end, their poems show the same kind of horror that was present in the trench poetry of male writers such as Wilfred Owen. Their representation of the trenches on the Western front was just as realistic and horrible as the descriptions in Owen's poems, for instance "The Sentry" (1917) in which we can read:

Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime  
Kept slush waist high, that rising hour by hour,  
Choked up the steps too thick with clay to climb.  
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour  
With fumes of whizz-bangs, and the smell of men  
Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den,  
If not their corpses. . . . (4-10)

#### **4. Women's role in the First World War**

In this chapter, I will analyse how women's poems responded to the traditional division between war roles for men and women. In the second chapter, I have discussed how the First World War was a clear illustration of Goldstein's claim that war is a gendered conflict with separate roles for men and women. While more than 5.7 million men from Great Britain were sent to the front as soldiers (Baker, *The long, long trail*), British women had to stay either at home or in the zone behind the front where they had to support the war in a number of ways. As I have mentioned in chapter two, women could support the war by means of their labour, for instance in munitions factories or military hospitals, or they could help to convince men to sign up, something which became clear in my discussion of the White Feathers campaign. On the other hand, there were also women, mainly feminists, who publicly opposed the war as pacifists. While there was thus an acceptance of female war roles in Great Britain, there were also women who did not conform to the traditional female role as supporter of war.

In this part of my thesis, I will argue that this ambivalence towards female war roles is reflected in the poetry that was written by female writers about the First World War. In this large body of poetry we encounter both confirmation as well as contestation of traditional female roles during wartime. As will become clear in the following analysis, many poems by female writers are patriotic in tone or deal with female war workers who accept and enjoy their non-combatant wartime job, despite the hard and dangerous work, since it allows them to make a valuable contribution to the war effort as a woman. However, there were also women poets who did the opposite: not only did they challenge the idea that women had to be patriotic supporters of the war by writing anti-war verse, in their poems they also criticized the exclusion of women from combat roles.

##### **4.1. Supporting the war by means of women's labour**

One of the most important ways in which women could support the First World War was by means of their labour (Goldstein 380). As Susan R. Grayzel writes, "World War I was the first European (and ultimately global) war of the modern era to demand the full participation of both combatants and noncombatants" (*Identities 2*). Instead of passively waiting at home and sending their men to the front to do the fighting, women were now also expected to become part of the war effort. While in some roles women directly contributed to the British war system, for instance by working in a munitions factory or a military hospital, other women took on jobs that were not directly related to the war effort but which nonetheless were still important roles. One can think for example of the women who occupied the jobs of the men who were sent to the front, for example police officers or bus conductors.

As becomes clear from Nina Macdonald's nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of War-Time" (1918), even small domestic tasks could be considered war work. In this poem, a little boy says that his "Mummie does the house-work" (17) so that the family's maid can go work in the factories where she will directly help to support the war. The family's nurse is also contributing to the war by "Sewing shirts for soldiers, / Nearly ev'ry day" (23-24). In Jessie Pope's poem "No!" (1915), she describes how women could occupy themselves with this kind of labour while waiting for their men to return. Even though they only knit to pass to time, their work is still considered as doing their part for the war effort. The end of this poem reads as follows:

And what of the girl who is left behind,  
 And the wife who misses her mate?  
 Oh, well, we've got our business to mind  
 Though it's only to watch and wait.  
 So we'll take what comes with a gallant heart  
 As we busily knit and sew,  
 Trying, God help us, to do our part, (17-23)

There was thus a large number of ways in which British women could support the war through their work. Some of these contributions were only small, while others involved a full-time job, but what they all had in common is that each one of the jobs was considered as important and legitimate war work. As Nina Macdonald wrote in her poem: "Ev'ry body's doing / Something for the War" (25). In the following analysis of women's labour, I will make a distinction between two types of jobs: those which were considered typical female work and those which were seen as male jobs. I will analyse how these two kinds of jobs were represented in women's poetry and how the poems' speakers responded to these roles.

When analysing these poems it is important to keep in mind that most of them were not purely imagined, but that they were based on the personal experience of the female poet. As Marie Connor Leighton wrote in the foreword of Vera Brittain's *Verses of a V.A.D.* (1918) about the poems that were published by women: "[this] new and vigorous type of poetry which has sprung from the last few years [...] has its root in things done and suffered rather than in things merely imagined" (9). The poets Vera Brittain, Eva Dobell, and May Wedderburn Cannan, for instance, all wrote poems about the work of a nurse, something which they were familiar with since all of them served as nurses at some point in the war (Reilly 131-132).

### **4.1.1. Women workers in male roles**

#### **4.1.1.1. Historical context**

During the First World War there were many women who worked in what was considered at the time as male jobs. Some examples of this are working as a police officer, a bus conductor or a munitions worker (see images 20-23). These jobs were considered as only appropriate for men because they existed in the public space which, as Doreen Massey wrote, only belonged to men (179). In her book *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), Massey wrote that for a long time this public space was seen as male, and the private sphere was seen as female (179). The workplace and the home were thus separated and both of them were seen as either a male or a female space. The first real threats to this dichotomy started to appear when during the Industrial Revolution working class women began working in factories. As Massey writes, these women became “economically active” (179) and at the time, “the fact of women having access to an independent income was [considered] a source of anxiety” (179). According to Massey, women who escaped the confines of the home were seen as a threat in two ways: “it might subvert the willingness of women to perform their domestic roles and [...] it gave them entry into another, public, world – ‘a life not defined by family and husband’” (180).

Anxieties like these really existed at the time, as becomes clear from a speech by Lord Shaftesbury in the British Parliament in which he said that women would become “demoralized” (qtd. in Braybon 21) when they were allowed to do paid work in the public space. Women were seen as ideal housewives who were “the guiding light of the home” (Braybon 21), and it was this view of women which needed to be protected. As feminist Anna Martin wrote in 1910, a woman was not allowed to have “any desires outside her own four walls” (qtd. in Braybon 40). This becomes clear in a later speech by Lord Shaftesbury in which he accused women workers of betraying their female nature:

You are poisoning the very sources of order and happiness and virtue; you are tearing up root and branch all relations of families to one another; you are annulling, as it were, the institution of domestic life decreed by Providence Himself, the wisest and kindest of all earthly ordinances, the mainstay of peace and virtue and therein of national security. (qtd. in Braybon 22)

Even though protest was made against female labour in public spaces, women continued to work in factories. In the areas in which women had been doing industrial work for some decades, communities slowly started to get used to the idea of women working in public spaces (Braybon 26). In the areas in which there were no industrial jobs available to women, for instance in the mining areas of Great Britain where only men were allowed to work, the belief that women’s only true place was

the home was still prevalent (Braybon 26). As Gail Braybon writes, women's labour in these areas "was classed as highly undesirable, and notions of 'a woman's place is in the home' were very strong" (26).

These kinds of ideas still existed during the beginning of the twentieth century when the public workplace, despite the presence of women, was still seen as a "masculine world" (Jarrige 24). When war broke out in 1914, women were needed more than ever in this male space. The war was being fought on a large scale and all men were needed as soldiers at the front. As Gail Braybon writes, "[t]his was the first time England had fought a war so greedy for men" (50). This meant that women needed to be mobilized as well since they had to occupy the jobs that men previously held. In this way, the home front would still be running even though most of its men had gone to fight in Europe. As Braybon wrote, "the nation was surviving through the efforts of women" (61). Many women took on important roles in the war industry so that British men were not needed here and could be sent to the actual battlefields. In her poem "The War Bag" (1916), Jessie Pope asks women to release their men from their normal daily work in Great Britain. In this poem she gives women advice on how to help win the war. She advises them to carry their own groceries instead of calling for a shop boy who will do this for them. When he is no longer needed in Great Britain he can go "fight the Teuton" (19).

During this time, "female labour", as Braybon writes, "lay at the heart of the government's efforts to organize war production" (50). She writes that during the beginning of the war more and more women were employed in industries. At first they still only did female industrial work, such as producing clothes, but during the summer of 1915 women began taking over the industrial jobs that belonged to men before the war. This is what Gail Braybon names 'Substitution', "the extensive use of women in place of men" (45). The most important industrial male job that women took over was working in the munitions industry, an industry which grew drastically during the war since more and more munition was needed (Braybon 46). The British government started national campaigns in order to convince women to start working in these factories. According to Braybon, this campaign was so successful that in 1916 there were shortages in the traditional female industries, such as clothing and textile (46). In 1917, the *Labour Gazette* even stated that 1 in 3 working women were doing the industrial jobs that previously belonged to men (Braybon 46). Whereas in 1914, there were only 125 women working in the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich, London, in 1917 this number had risen to 25.000 female workers (Braybon 46). In total, there were around one million British women, mainly from the lower classes, who worked as munitions workers during the First World War (Goldstein 384).

Braybon writes that in non-industrial male jobs, women were already employed in early 1915 (45). Women worked for instance in business offices, transport services, banks, post offices and shops

(Braybon 45). In 1917, the later Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain said the following about these women's work in the First World War:

In previous wars they had been confined to specially feminine tasks such as the nursing and feeding of soldiers and the making of garments and bandages. In this war they had not only done these things, but they had invaded the spheres hitherto considered sacred to men. They had come into the office, the munition factory, even to the tramcars. They had become postmen, police-men and agricultural labourers, and they had done all those things with an efficiency which had surprised and delighted the whole nation. (qtd. in Braybon 156)

The acceptance of women in these male jobs represented a severe challenge to traditional gender roles. During the war, British women were suddenly allowed and even encouraged to leave the domestic sphere and to come work in factories or other male workplaces. As Goldstein has written, some women indeed felt as if they were "being let out of a cage" (320). This did not mean, however, that the attitude of British men towards women's professional labour had completely changed and that all of them were now positive about women working in the public sphere. On the contrary, people were still rather reluctant to allow women to take over these male jobs. As Gail Braybon writes, while "some employers did indeed employ women voluntarily from 1914 onwards" (82-83), many other employers and male workers believed that "[women] had no business to be in factories at all" (83).

The first reason why employers were not eager to employ women in their companies during the war was because they were afraid that women's work in factories would form a threat to the traditional image of women as the angels of the house. For instance, when asked to explain why his company opposed women's war labour, John Wadsworth, General Secretary of the Yorkshire Miners' Association, said the following: "[w]e think a woman's place is at home, looking after the home, husband and family" (qtd. in Braybon 74). Secondly, they also feared that women's industrial war work would endanger traditional male working life (Braybon 72). They feared that women would experience too much freedom and that after the war they would demand to stay in their jobs, something which posed a dangerous threat to men's former jobs. G.D.H. Cole wrote about this "competition of female labour" (qtd. in Braybon 71) for male workers. He argued that men were afraid that after the war they would find "[their] job taken or [their] standard of life threatened" (qtd. in Braybon 71) by female workers. As I will argue later, this fear turned out to be false since after the war, all men returned to their former jobs and British women were once again brought back to their homes.

The fear that existed during the beginning of the First World War about women workers was not so different from what people believed during the onset of the Second World War when British

women also had to contribute to the war effort. With regards to the male attitudes that existed during the beginning of the Second World War, Philomena Goodman has written the following:

There were fears that war would provide the conditions for women's sexual liberty and economic independence. Women would have the opportunity to colonise male space, to achieve their potential in the public domain, to achieve self-determination and perhaps, in some cases, to challenge inequality. Women in the public sphere could lead to a threat to pre-war patterns of social relations. (103)

This anxiety also existed in 1914, but the British government at the time knew that if they did not make this exception, the war would be lost. Many men opposed women's war work in former male jobs but as Gail Braybon writes, these men "sometimes forget [...] women's need for work" (75). They can protest against female munitions workers or tram drivers, but if they were being listened to, the war could no longer continue as it did before. In 1914, American feminist Carrie Chapman Catt wrote that with regards to work, "[w]ar falls on the women most heavily, and more so now than ever before" (qtd. in Goldstein 384). This quote illustrates that women played an immensely significant role in the First World War and that without them, the British would not have been as successful as they were during 1914-1918. As Goldstein writes in the conclusion of his section on women's war work: "women's labor of all kinds is indispensable to military success" (396).

#### 4.1.1.2. Analysis of the poems

There was thus a double attitude towards women's work in the First World War. On the one hand, women were welcomed to work for the war effort by their own government, but on the other hand, there was also protest because of the belief that women's war work in male jobs would threaten traditional gender roles. In Nina Macdonald's poem "Sing a Song of War-Time", this collapse of traditional gender roles is foregrounded. The speaker of this poem is a little boy who describes how the war has affected his life. At the end of the poem he says, or rather sings:

Girls are doing things  
They've never done before,  
Go as 'bus conductors,  
Drive a car or van,  
All the world is topsy-turvy

Since the War began. (27-32)

As becomes clear from Madeline Ida Bedford's poem "Munition Wages" (1917), this topsyturvydom of the war caused a feeling of liberation for female munitions workers. In this poem, the speaker is a female factory worker who has adopted the working-class speech of industrial labourers. As Argha Banerjee has argued, this poem is a "parodied version of a munitions' workers evident pride in her new lifestyle" ("Women's" 23). Bedford assumes the persona of the female munitions worker and in an exaggerated way she tells her readers how amazing her new life is. This description is an exaggeration because work in munitions factories was not so easy and fantastic as this speaker says. As Angela Woollacott has argued, life in munitions factories was extremely hard and dangerous for women (9). What is specifically liberating for this female speaker about her work in the munitions factory is that she earns her own money which she can spend however she wants. In the poem's first stanza she immediately draws attention to how special it is that she, as a woman, is earning so much money:

Earning high wages? Yus,  
 Five quid a week.  
 A woman, too, mind you,  
 I calls it dim sweet. (1-4)

The female speaker is well aware of the resentment that was present among men towards female workers like her, and she addresses their fear in her poem. One of these men's anxieties was that as soon as women were given some kind of freedom they would start to behave immorally. This is not the case in this poem since she is still "acting the lady" (11). However, another fear that men had was that women were not able to responsibly spend their money, and instead of proving them wrong, this is exactly what is confirmed in the poem:

Ye'are asking some questions –  
 But bless yer, here goes:  
 I spends the whole racket  
 On good times and clothes.  
 Me saving? Elijah!

Yer do think I'm mad. (5-10)

Whereas men would see this woman as the perfect example of why women should not be allowed to work and have their own money, she does not worry at all and she celebrates her independence because she knows that an air attack can happen at any moment and when it does she at least has enjoyed her last days by spending money on the things she likes. As Anne Spurgeon has argued, this free spending of money is combined with a "careless attitud[e] towards life and morality" (70):

I'm having life's good times.

See 'ere, it's like this:

The 'oof come o' danger,

A touch-and-go bizz.

We're all here today, mate,

Tomorrow – perhaps dead,

If Fate tumbles on us

And blows up our shed.

Afraid! Are yer kidding?

With money to spend!

Years back I wore tatters,

Now – silk stockings, mi friend!

I've bracelets and jewellery,

Rings envied by friends;

A sergeant to swank with,

And something to lend.

I drive out in taxis,

Do theatres in style.

And this is mi verdict –

It is jolly worth while. (13-32)

Whereas before the war, she wore cheap tatters, now she has worked her way up the social ladder and she can afford expensive silk stockings, for instance. In this passage, she first addresses the fears of men but then she waves them away and she stresses how much she likes her new life. Because of this, the poem becomes an exaggerated “celebration of happiness and liberation” (Clayton 4). This female speaker not only accepts her wartime role as a woman, she also enjoys working in her male job since it gives her a sense of freedom, autonomy and class mobility. What is interesting about this poem is that this sense of liberation combined with the high wages, seem to have been the woman’s primary motivation to sign up for this work since no mention is made of a higher patriotic purpose behind her wartime work.

On the other hand, there were also women poets who presented a completely different attitude towards women’s industrial war work. While women like the one in Bedford’s poem enjoyed the fact that during the war, women had to work in former male jobs, others did not like their male work and they thought it inappropriate to work in these jobs as women. Mary Gabrielle Collins’ poem is an excellent example of this. In her poem “Women at Munition Making” (1916), she argues that it goes against women’s nature to do hard and rough factory work. As Claire A. Culleton has written about this poem, its speaker “criticizes women for turning their instinctive, maternal benevolence towards the manufacturing of deadly munitions” (112). As becomes clear in the following lines, women’s role as mothers who give and take care of life, is contrasted to male munitions work which expects labourers to create instruments that will do the opposite, namely killing lives:

Their hands should minister unto the flame of life,

Their fingers guide

The rosy teat, swelling with milk,

To the eager mouth of the suckling babe

Softly and soothingly,

The heated brow of the ailing child.

Or stray among the curls  
 Of the boy or girl, thrilling to mother love.  
 But now,  
 Their hands, their fingers  
 Are coarsened in munition factories.  
 Their thoughts, which should fly  
 Like bees among the sweetest mind flowers,  
 Gaining nourishment for the thoughts to be,  
 Are bruised against the law,  
 'Kill, kill'. (1-17)

Collins' poem shows that not all British women were positive about women's liberation from traditional female work. The speaker of this poem wishes that women would quit their new male jobs since she feels that it is both unnatural and wrong for women, as life-givers, to take part in the killing of men.

For this woman, her war work did not feel like a liberation and this was the case for more women during the First World War. In their studies, Goldstein (2001) and Braybon (1981) have argued that the view that British women were liberated by their wartime roles needs to be nuanced. Women were allowed to work in male jobs but this was only for the duration of the war. After the war everything was brought back to how it was before, including the traditional gender roles. The reason for this was that, "[b]y the end of the war there was a strong desire to get back to the 'normality' or 'stability' of peacetime" (Braybon 13-14). As Goldstein has argued, the gender transgressions during World War One, were only "short-lived" (320) and "temporary" (384). The war was just a small interval in which it was women who took over male jobs, but in their essence, these jobs were still masculine. This idea that the work itself was still considered male during the war becomes clear from the appropriation of masculine behaviour by the women who worked in these jobs. In her poem "War Girls" (1916), Jessie Pope writes about all the kinds of work which women took over from men during the war:

There's the girl who clips your ticket for the train,  
 And the girl who speeds the life from floor to floor,

There's the girl who does a milk-round in the rain,  
 And the girl who calls for orders at your door.  
 Strong, sensible, and fit,  
 They're out to show their grit,  
 And tackle jobs with energy and knack.  
 No longer caged and penned up,  
 They're going to keep their end up  
 Till the khaki soldier boys come marching back (1-10)

As becomes clear from this last line, in Pope's poem women were always meant to take on male jobs only temporarily. The women are working in traditional male jobs and from the outside they act as if they were men. Later on in the poem we can read for instance that "[t]here's the girl who cries 'All fares, please!' like a man" (13). These women in Pope's poem thus feel that the jobs in which they are working are essentially male and that if they, as women, want to take these jobs, then they have to act as a man. Pope writes that "beneath each uniform / beats a heart that's soft and warm" (15-16), a real female heart, but in their professional male role "[t]here's no time for love and kisses" (19).

#### **4.1.2. Women workers in female roles**

Apart from working in male jobs, there was also a large number of women who worked in what was considered as typical female work. These typical female occupations that British women took up during the First World War were those in which women's traditional feminine characteristics were expressed. The most important female work that women did was working as a nurse. As Goldstein has written, the profession of being a nurse is all about "matriarchal qualities" (314) such as caring, loving and comforting. In contrast to the female munitions workers, the nurses who worked during the First World War were mainly from the middle class of British society (Braybon 11). As Janet Lee has argued, they were "socially and economically privileged women who did not have to provide for themselves and their families" (17). Financial reward was thus not the primary motivation for these women. They either signed up because they wanted to help sick and innocent soldiers or because they wanted to serve their country.

These nurses were organized in military organisations in which it was women who had the lead. The most important group of female nurses were the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurses

who were supported by the British Red Cross. When war broke out in 1914, a large campaign started in order to recruit as much women as possible for the VAD system. As can be read on one recruitment poster, you did not need to be a trained nurse in order to work as a VAD, you could also take one of the following professions: “cooks, kitchen maids, clerks, house maids, ward maids, laundresses, motor drivers etc.” (see image 24). According to official numbers, around 90.000 men and women worked as VADs during the war, both at home and overseas (“Volunteers”, *British Red Cross*). This large group was almost completely made up of women.

Most of the female poets who wrote about nursing work were nurses themselves, and almost all of them were a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse. Vera Brittain and Eva Dobell, for instance, both worked as a V.A.D. nurse (Reilly 131-132). In their poems they describe the work which nurses did, but they do not present it as nationalist work for their country. What their female nurses are doing is just helping their patients to recover both physically as well as emotionally. In Eva Dobell’s poem “Gramophone Tunes” (1919), the female nurse is cheering up her patients with the music from the ward’s gramophone, just as any other nurse outside of war would do. Similarly, in the poetry of Vera Brittain, who after the war became a prominent pacifist and feminist, we find no traces of patriotism in her poems about war nursing. In her poetry collection *Verses of a V.A.D.* (1918), she describes nursing work as the “labou[r] to comfort and save” (43), not as a national service to her country. For the female nurses in her poems it does not matter what the nationality of the wounded soldiers is, they will take care of all of them. In her poem “In a German Ward” (1918), for instance, the British nurses take care of the German soldiers in the same way as they nurse the British ones.

In Jessie Pope’s poem “V.A.D.” (1916), on the other hand, there is a clear nationalist motivation behind the nurse’s work. The poem starts in the following way:

Kit was pretty, gay, and young,  
 Good at games and quick of tongue.  
 When the war engulfed us, she  
 Soon became a “V.A.D.”  
 Dropped her pleasures, one and all,  
 Signed on at a hospital. (1-6)

The female character Kit finds her work in the hospital hard, but despite all the hard work, she sticks to her job. The poem continues in the following way:

Bowed her head and bit her lip,

Learnt her job with surer grip;  
 Nursed her Tommies back to strength,  
 Earned unstinted praise at length.  
 Kit, you're but a type, it's true –  
 And your country's proud of you! (19-24)

In this poem by Jessie Pope the female nurse's work is clearly represented as a national service to her country. She helps soldiers to recover so that they can go back to the front, and in return her country thanks her and tells her how proud they are of her work.

Another aspect of women's nursing work that needs to be discussed here, is the fact that the work which female nurses did was not always easy. Christine E. Hallett has written that the British nurses during the war led lives in which one day was full of "joys" (2), the nurse was, for instance, having fun with her colleagues and she successfully saved the lives of soldiers who showed their gratitude to her, while the other day was full of "sorrows" (2), she encountered horrible wounds, for example, or she saw several soldiers die in the hospital she worked in. On these days, nursing work was "dirty, dangerous, disgusting, enormously hard and stressful labor" (Pauw 218). In her poem "To Another Sister" (1918), Vera Brittain writes, for instance, about "[t]he burdened toil" (13) of working as a nurse. Because of all the suffering and the horrible things she sees every day, this female nurse's "eyes would often weep / Through bitter midnight hours when others sleep" (2-3). In Jessie Pope's poem about a V.A.D. nurse, nothing is said about this negative side of nursing work.

Not only was life as a nurse extremely hard, it was also possible that the female nurses who worked near the battle zone became the victim of air bombs or gas attacks (Goldstein 313). Just as was the case for the male soldiers in the trenches, the daily lives of female nurses near the frontline were not safe. In her poem, "Vengeance is Mine" (1918), Vera Brittain writes about the female nurses whom she knew, and who died during an air attack in Étaples. In another one of her poems, "The Sisters Buried at Lemnos" (1918), Brittain focuses on the sisters who died because of the bad working conditions. She explains how these nurses' deaths were completely ignored by the war authorities. The women in this poem died of "heat and hunger, sickness and privation, / And Winter's deathly chill and blinding snow" (11-12). In contrast to the male soldiers, "[s]eldom they enter into song or story; / Poets praise the soldier's might and deeds of War / But few exalt the Sisters, and the glory / Of women dead beneath a distant star" (5-8). Women were thus praised as nurses, but when they died during their service for their country, they did not receive the same recognition that heroic male soldiers did.

The only people who will remember them are the female speaker of the poem and the “humble men they saved” (20).

In M. Winifred Wedgwood’s poems about VAD work, the work which the female nurses did was different from what the nurses in Brittain’s poems did. Whereas Brittain focuses on the trained nurses who care for the male soldiers, Wedgwood’s nurse characters do the ‘low’ kind of work, such as cleaning, which was also done by VADs. In her poem “The V.A.D. Scullery-Maid’s Song” (1917), she describes the lower work which some VADs did:

Washing up the dishes;

Washing up the plates;

Washing up the greasy tins,

That everybody hates.

Scouring out the buckets;

Cleaning down the stoves.

...

Others are much more smarter;

More clever, too, than I.

Still I go on ‘charing’;

Singing cheerfully (1-16)

In another one of her poems, “Christmas, 1916” (1917), the VADs are preparing a Christmas dinner for the sick soldiers. In this poem, it becomes clear how nursing work was not really considered as work but more as a voluntary service to thank the male soldiers who were fighting for them against the dangerous enemy. In this poem, the women are preparing an Irish stew for the sick men and even though this is a lot of work, they say it is worth it because in return the soldiers give something even better, namely protection against the Germans:

Then there’s cutting the thin bread and butter,

For the men who are very ill;

But we feel we’re well rewarded;

For they've fought old Kaiser Bill (13-16)

This idea of female work as a service to male soldiers is perhaps even better illustrated in C.A.L.T.'s poem "Y.M.C.A." (1915). This poem is about a group of female canteen workers who serve food for the male soldiers and who constantly tell each other "little jokes" (12) to pass the time. When the female speaker has served a soldier and he has given her his tickets, she simply tells him 'thank you'. She explains that this answer has an important double meaning for her:

Two simple words are all I say,  
 I've saved them up for many a day –  
 Just 'thank you', but they mean a lot!  
 Accept them, for they're all I've got  
 To tell my gratitude, they come  
 Straight from my heart. On Monday, some  
 Five hundred times I say them o'ver,  
 And wish it were five hundred more! (33-40)

What she tries to explain here is that by saying these two words, she not only thanks the soldier for his tickets, since in this case her reaction would be a bit exaggerated, but she also thanks him in general for his military service to their country. In this poem, women's work is thus presented as a female way of saying thank you to the male soldiers. As the poem suggests, men worked even harder than women to protect their nation on the battlefield and the least which women could do was thanking the soldiers by providing them with food. In this case, women's wartime labour becomes not so much a form of professional work, but more a national service offered by women to their country and its soldiers.

#### **4.1.3. Contesting women's wartime work**

In the poems on women's war work that I have discussed in the previous two sections, most women are content with the wartime roles which the British war authorities had designed for them. They consider their work to be valuable and they genuinely feel that by doing this work they are doing their bit for their country or for its men. In other words, what military service in the trenches meant for the

soldiers is the same as what the war work in hospitals, factories etc. came to mean for women. Both saw their work as a significant contribution of their gender to their country's war effort.

Even though some poets stressed how hard and dangerous the nursing work sometimes was, they still accepted this female kind of work because for them this was the way in which they could thank the soldiers for protecting them on the battlefields. In some poems, the nurses do not only accept their work, they are also enjoying it, as became clear in the poems where they were singing or chatting during their shifts. The acceptance of women's war roles was also present in the poems about female workers who had to do male jobs. They enjoyed working in these male professions since for them they represented more independence. They did not only like their work because it allowed them to make an important contribution to their country's military success, but also because it gave them a new sense of freedom. There were also some poems in which women did not enjoy doing male work in factories since this clashed with their female nature, but overall, the tone of these poems about women's work during the Great War was quite positive.

While in these poems there was a general acceptance of women's roles in wartime, this is not the case in Nora Bomford's "Drafts" (1918) and Cicely Hamilton's "Non-Combatant" (1916). In these two poems, the female speaker is not content with the gendered division in war work and she wants to break these rules. In her poem, Nora Bomford writes the following:

Sex, nothing more, constituent no greater  
 Than those which make an eyebrow's slant or fall,  
 In origin, sheer accident, which, later,  
 Decides the biggest differences of all.  
 And, through a war, involves the chance of death  
 Against a life of physical normality –  
 So dreadfully safe! O, damn the shibboleth  
 Of sex! God knows we've equal personality.  
 Why should men face the dark while women stay  
 To live and laugh and meet the sun each day (11-20)

In this poem, the speaker first addresses some of the ideas of postmodern feminism. According to postmodern feminists, men and women are essentially the same at birth. It is during the child's

socialization when the categories 'man' and 'woman' start to play a role. Postmodern feminists believe that "gender itself, and gender roles in war, [are] fairly fluid, contextual, and arbitrary" (Goldstein 49). Just as the women from this feminist branch, the speaker in Bomford's poem believes that at birth "a sheer accident" (13) takes place, namely the imposition of cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity on children, and later on this "[d]ecides the biggest differences of all" (14). While girls become passive women, boys become tough and active men. She writes that in war, this gendered division is marked by either "the chance of death" (15) for men or "a life of physical normality" (16) for women. Nosheen Khan has written that in this specific part, the poem shows some resemblances to Rose Macaulay's poem "Many Sisters to Many Brothers" (140). In this poem Macaulay writes:

Oh, it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck:

You were born beneath a kindly star;

All we dreamt, I and you, you can really go and do,

And I can't, the way things are.

In a trench you are sitting, while I am knitting

A hopeless sock that never gets done. (17-22)

Just as in Bomford's poem, this speaker believes that at birth the difference between the brother and sister was decided. He was born under "a kindly star" (18) so he has "the luck" (17) to fight. She cannot do this because of the gender norms which determine "the way things are" (20). Brian Clayton has argued that in Macaulay's poem the female speaker is rather naive (7), especially since later on in the poem she believes that for her, "a war is poor fun" (24). In Bomford's poem the speaker is not so naive and she is well aware of the "dark" (19) reality of the war which is not fun at all. Despite this, she still wants to join the soldiers on the battlefield.

When the speaker in Bomford's poem writes: "damn the shibboleth of sex" (17), the tone of the poem moves away from simply observing the gender difference between men and woman, and a more active feminist voice appears. In this second part, the ideas of liberal feminism are clearly expressed. According to Goldstein, liberal feminists believe that men and women should have all the freedom to become whatever they want, society's gender norms cannot stop them. These liberal feminists "reject the idea that women are any more peaceful than man by nature" (Goldstein 40), and, just as Bomford's speaker, they believe that men and women have "equal personality" (18). Their main belief is that "[w]omen have the right to participate in all social and political roles (including war roles)



on her life as a wartime woman. She desires to join the fighting men and to give her life on the battlefield, since she feels that only in this way will she make herself useful to her country.

Thus, in both Bomford and Hamilton's poems the female speaker contests the role imposed on her by the war authorities. Both of them are not satisfied with their passive role in the safe homeland and they want to break with traditional gendered wartime roles so that they as women can also fight as soldiers on the front. Only in this way, will we achieve a full equality between men and women.

#### **4.2. Supporting the cause of the war**

As I have argued in chapter two, during the First World War, women were expected to support the cause of the war and to convince their men to sign up for the army. Images of women sending their men to the front or daring men to show their masculinity, for instance, were frequently used in propaganda posters. Not only in these posters, but also in reality did British women have an important role to play in recruiting men for the war. In the white feathers campaign, for example, women publicly shamed those men who had not signed up. As I will argue in this part of my thesis, there were many female poets who conformed to this female role during wartime: in their poetry they encouraged men to sign up, they glorified the war and the soldiers who fought in it, and they contributed to the creation of a national optimistic spirit. On the other hand, there were also many women poets who did not agree with the idea that women needed to support the war that men were fighting. Instead of supporting the war, their poems criticize the war. These women poets promoted ideas about pacifism, they were critical of the war lords, they challenged the romantic view of dying for your country, and they offered critique of the jingoistic woman who enthusiastically supported her country and its men.

##### **4.2.1. Women's patriotic and optimistic poetry**

When the war broke out in 1914, David Lloyd George set up a British War Propaganda Bureau which was responsible for the image that was presented of the war to the British public and other countries. M. L. Sanders has argued that this propaganda was initially directed towards the United States of America and its aim was to confute the false images that were produced by German propaganda (119). This organization, also referred to as Wellington House and led by Charles F. G. Masterman, operated secretly, and even though its main goal was to influence foreign opinion, they also had departments which focused on controlling the opinion of the war in Great Britain itself (Sanders 128). Irene De Angelis has written that the propaganda directed towards British audiences was designed to encourage

recruitment and to portray the Germans as their shared enemy (74-75). Meredith Martin adds to this that the propaganda was also used in order to “boost national morale” (234). The people who worked in this department soon realised the role which literature, films, and art could play in propaganda. During one of its first meetings, important literary figures, such as H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling, were invited to talk about how they could contribute to the war (McEvoy, *The Great War*). Sadia McEvoy has argued that “[t]his group [...] was to have a sustained influence on war propaganda in the years to follow” (*The Great War*). According to McEvoy, these propagandists understood the value of literary propaganda (*The Great War*). One example of such a nationalistic poem in which British soldiers are asked to join the war is Rudyard Kipling’s “For All We Have And Are” (1914). The patriotic tone is already present in the poem’s first lines:

For all we have and are,  
 For all our children's fate,  
 Stand up and take the war.  
 The Hun [the German] is at the gate! (1-4)

Andrew Palmer has argued that outside of this propaganda bureau, there were also many poets who wrote patriotic poems in which they glorified their country or in which they convinced men to enlist (140). One perfect example of a female poet who wrote such verse is Jessie Pope. During the war, she became famous for her patriotic motivational poems (Potter, *Oxford Dictionary*). Jane Potter writes that Pope’s war poetry was “[w]idely disseminated and widely read, [and] attracted both admiration and condemnation” (*Oxford Dictionary*). In the beginning of her poetry collection *Jessie Pope’s War Poems* (1915), for instance, we find a letter from a soldier in the trenches who tells her that “[her] verses were much admired by us all here” (2). Poets like Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, condemned such jingoistic writers as Jessie Pope. Owen even dedicated his most famous anti-war poem “Dulce et Decorum Est” to ‘Jessie Pope etc.’ (see image 25).

Nowadays, the feeling that people in Great Britain have towards this female poet is the same as that of Owen. In an article for *BBC News*, Marek Pruszewicz writes that Jessie Pope is “[t]he WW1 poet kids are taught to dislike” (*BBC News*). He points out how not only in British schools but also outside of them, Pope is seen as the ultimate example of the naive jingoistic woman who glorifies the war without having any clue of what the dark realities of war are. He writes for instance that “[w]ith the benefit of hindsight, [for school children] the sentiments [of her poems] now seem crass, even sinister, and the light, tripping style appallingly inappropriate” (*BBC News*). One retired school teacher

recalls, for instance, how his pupils were always very critical of Jessie Pope's nationalistic poems (*BBC News*). The contemporary attitudes towards her poetry are understandable from our post-WW1 perspective, but as the teacher who is being interviewed argues, her poetry should be read within the context of the early years of the war. He says that "the patriotic sentiments expressed in Pope's verses were what many wanted to hear at the time, rather than those found in the 'select canon' of war poetry, generally condemning the war, studied with reverence today" (qtd. in Pruszewicz, *BBC News*).

Probably Pope's most famous poems are "The Call" (1915) and "Who's for the Game?" (1916). Just like her other poems, these two texts were first published in newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* and then later in one of her poetry collections (Potter, *Oxford Dictionary*). Her poem "The Call" is an enumeration of direct questions to its male reader, the "laddie" (2). The poems' three stanzas are structured in the same way. First, she asks questions to which the desired answer is 'yes'. She names the heroic things which the soldier will do and then she asks the reader whether he wants to do these things for his country. At the end of each stanza she plays with the soldiers' insecurity and their reluctance to enlist. She asks them whether they want to be seen as cowards, thus clearly challenging the soldiers' masculinity, and the desired answer to these questions is 'no'. This becomes clear when we take a closer look at the first stanza:

Who's for the trench –  
                                   Are you, my laddie?  
 Who'll follow French –  
                                   Will you, my laddie?  
 Who's fretting to begin,  
 Who's going out to win?  
 And who wants to save his skin –  
                                   Do you, my laddie? (1-8)

For the first two questions, the answer is supposed to be 'yes' and for the last one 'no'. By posing her questions in this way, Pope is convincing her male readers to sign up since at the end of their poem she makes them aware of what the consequences of their answers will be. After the war has ended, the men who signed up will "earn the Empire's thanks" (17) and those who did not "[will] stand and bite [their] thumbs" (23), realising that they made a mistake and should have enlisted too.

The same pattern is repeated in her poem “Who’s for the Game?”. She again starts by asking soldiers whether they want to prove themselves a hero, and then she ends the stanza by asking them whether they want to become cowards. This structure is illustrated in the first stanza:

Who’s for the game, the biggest that’s played,  
 The red, crashing game of a fight?  
 Who’ll grip and tackle the job, unafraid?  
 And who thinks he’d rather sit tight? (1-4)

She ends her poem with an explicit call to all British men:

Come along, lads – but you’ll come on all right –  
 For there’s only one course to pursue,  
 Your country is up to her neck in a fight,  
 And she’s looking and calling for you. (13-16)

In her poems, Jessie Pope not only encourages men to enlist for the war. She also glorifies the war and she praises Great Britain’s soldiers. In her poem “Little and Good” (1915), for instance, she exalts a soldier who is too small to enter the army but who does not give up because he wants to help his country. At the end of the poem, when conscription starts and “the standard height’s curtailed” (17), the man is rewarded for his perseverance and he is allowed to enlist. She again praises British soldiers in her poem “The K.A. Boys” (1915), in which the speaker is watching a battalion march by. This poem ends with the following two lines: “Oh, I want to cheer and I want to cry / When Kitchener’s [an important British army officer] Boys go marching by” (20-21).

There are more female poets who have glorified either the war or its soldiers in their poems. In her poem “Anniversary of the Great Retreat (1915)” (1919), Isabel C. Clarke asks her country to praise and remember the men who fought bravely and then died for their country:

O England, sing their fame in song and story,  
 Who knew Death’s victory not Life’s defeat  
 Be their names written on thy roll of glory,  
 Who fought and perished in the Great Retreat! (13-16)

While in this poem all soldiers are praised, in other more personal poems it is one British soldier in particular who is remembered as a hero. In "To Tony (Aged 3)" (1919), Marjorie Wilson talks to her son about his father and she asks him to remember his father as a hero who died for him:

[When] you remember by your shadowed bed

All those – the brave – you must remember him.

And know it was for you who bear his name

And such as you that all his joy he gave –

His love of quiet fields, his youth, his life,

To win that heritage of peace you have (19-24)

In her poem "To My Brother" (1918), Vera Brittain illustrates how praising heroic soldiers was not necessarily linked to glorifying the war. Brittain herself was a pacifist and in this poem she refers to the war as a "tragic 'show'" (2). She did not support this war but she does admire the heroic actions of her brother Edward H. Brittain who died on the Italian Front in 1918 (Reilly 15). She remembers, for instance, how she watched "the symbol of [his] courage glow - / That cross [he] won / Two years ago" (6-8).

Apart from encouraging men to sign up and glorifying the war and its soldiers, women had another important task in their poetry namely to boost the national spirit. According to Argha Banerjee, it was sometimes hard for women to combine this task with grieving the dead soldiers. During the war hundreds of thousands British soldiers were killed, which means that death was omnipresent at the time. Almost every British woman knew a soldier who had died and it was her duty to mourn him. However, at the same time she also had to be optimistic about the war. The result of this was that grief was restricted to the private sphere (Banerjee, "Memory" 5). In their homes, women could mourn, but in public they had to keep up the good spirits. Banerjee writes that during the First World War, "women were even encouraged to abstain from making a public display of grief, as it was widely believed that such a show might lower the morale of the soldiers on leave" ("Memory" 5). In the public space they were allowed to praise their dead loved ones, but they were not allowed to weep or show sadness. The optimistic spirit thus had to be upheld and it was women's task to do this for their men. As Banerjee writes, "women's right to express their legitimate grief came to be subjected to the whims and fancies of the patriarchal state. They were expected to be proud of the sacrifices of

their lovers, husbands, brothers and sons for the nation and not to mourn personal losses in public” (“Memory” 6).

The suppression of grief in front of soldiers is illustrated in Alys Fane Trotter’s poem “The Hospital Visitor” (1924). In this poem, a woman is visiting wounded soldiers in a hospital and even though she feels sad, she hides these feelings because she does not want the soldiers to be miserable as well. In this poem she tells the reader that she knows that “I must not grieve, or tell them so” (8). The soldiers are optimistic and they try to look on the bright side of life. They never “talk of their ‘bad luck’” (23), nor do they complain about their pain. The woman copies their behaviour by also trying to show as much optimism as possible. In Jessie Pope’s poem “No!” (1915), the people at home in Great Britain also have to be positive and cheerful. At the end of each stanza she repeats the same line whose content shows how not only women but also men were expected to keep their spirits up: “Are we downhearted? – NO!” (8).

#### **4.2.2. Women’s critical anti-war poetry**

During the First World War, women were supposed to enthusiastically support the war, but there are many female poets who objected to this. These women wrote anti-war poetry in which they criticized the war authorities, the war itself and the women who supported the war so passionately. When we analyse these poems it becomes clear that not every British woman was like the patriotic mother of Siegfried Sassoon’s “Glory of Women”. On the contrary, there are many examples of women who were critical of the war. One of the poems which best illustrates the critical anti-war attitude of some women poets is a poem which Brian Murdoch refers to as “the archetypal anti-war poem by a woman” (41), namely Margaret Sackville well-known poem “Nostra Culpa” (1916). In this pacifist poem she blames women for the death of their soldiers. The speaker of this poem is a pacifist who is against the war. According to her, all women should be pacifists since they, in contrast to men, know “the worth / Of life” (1-2). She argues that women should have stood up against the war because they know how damaging war can be to human life. However, because they “fear[ed] that men should praise [them] less, [they] smiled” (6), and did not speak up against the war lords. As the poem says, “We knew the sword accursed, yet with the strong / Proclaimed the sword triumphant” (7-8). The speaker argues that because women kept quiet, “men died” (4). In the middle of the poem, she mentions the horrible consequences of their silence and she directly blames women, whom she daringly refers to as ‘harlots’, for the large number of casualties:

Shadows and echoes, harlots! We betrayed

Our sons; because men laughed we were afraid.  
 That silent wisdom which was ours we kept  
 Deep-buried; thousands perished; still we slept.  
 Children were slaughtered, women raped, the weak  
 Down-trodden. Very quiet was our sleep. (13-18)

In this poem, Sackville criticizes the traditional female war role as supporter of the war, but instead of using the ideas of liberal feminism, she links her poem to difference feminism. Difference feminists believe that there are “deep-rooted and partly biological gender differences” (Goldstein 39) between men and women which they are born with. One of these qualities that women do have and men do not, is that they have a closer connection with “nurturing and human relations” (Goldstein 41). As a consequence, difference feminists see a natural link between men and war, and women and peace. This is also the case in Sackville’s poem since she links women to the “silent wisdom” (15) which tells them the value of human life and peace. These women should oppose the war because they know the worth of peace and the worthlessness of war. Sackville’s poem thus does not agree with the idea that women should always be supporters of war since she believes that women are born to be pacifists.

In Margaret Sackville’s war poetry collection *The Pageant of War* (1916), there are more poems in which an anti-war feeling is present. According to Anne Varty, this sentiment of “ardent pacifism” is what has “shaped all [Sackville’s] war writing” (47). In “On the Pope’s Manifesto” (1916), for instance, she introduces the voice of the pope who says:

“Oh! Little ones of God, will ye not heal  
 These wounds, and cease from strife and hate no more?”  
 Vain words! Since violently as before  
 The nations heave, like a great sea up-tossed; (3-6)

In this poem, the speaker is pessimistic about the possibility of peace since she describes the pope’s words as “vain” (5). This poem refers to a speech which pope Benedict XV gave in July 1915. In this speech he urged for peace, but as Brian Murdoch has written, the pope’s ideas were completely ignored (43). In her poem “The Challenge” (1916), on the other hand, there is a more hopeful tone. In this poem, the war is going on and the pacifists, who ask themselves “[h]ow it is that men slaughter men even / here upon the earth?” (31-32), are silenced. However, the “silent ones [will] awake” (42) and what they will do is the following:

Not with more blood, with lies, with lust,  
 Or the sword's swing shall we  
 Drive that thick darkness from our doors  
 Where the fresh air should be; (45-48)

They will not solve the conflict with more fighting but with talking, and when they do this, "[the] clot of blood which is the world shall / melt at last / Into a kindly human stream" (61-63).

By writing all these pacifist anti-war poems, Sackville clearly distanced herself from the stereotype of the patriotic female supporter of the war. She demonstrates that contrary to what most people believed back then and, in some cases, even now, women were capable of writing protest poetry that was just as critical as the anti-war poems that male poets wrote (Reilly xxxv). Maria Geiger has argued, for instance, that Margaret Sackville's poems, which were written before the first real critical poems by men started to appear, possessed the same kind of language, irony and tone that could later be found in Sassoon and Owen's poetry (11). As Anne Varty has observed, "[i]n the business of debunking war, women, [...] have equal authority with their male counterparts" (38).

Geiger has also written that even though we now enjoy reading more critical poems about the war, at the time, this type of protest poetry was not popular at all. According to her, the reason for this was that "at [the] time [...] British nationalism was booming" (8). People only wished to read poetry which reflected their patriotic sentiments and for this reason, Sackville's poetry was not well received at the time (Geiger 8). She points out that the fact that Sackville's poetry was published at all in this nationalistic climate is already special. She writes that "if [Sackville] were a male poet, the general pacifism expressed in her poetry would not have been published" (8). It was already inappropriate for a woman to voice pacifist ideas but for a male soldier this was even worse.

Another example of protest poetry written by someone else than Sackville, is S. Gertrude Ford's "A Fight to a Finish" (1917). In this poem she challenges the dominant nationalistic discourse of war lords, kings and jingoists by offering a counter reaction to what they say:

'Fight the year out!' the War-lords said:

What said the dying among the dead?

'To the last man!' cried the profiteers:

What said the poor in the starveling years?

'War is good!' yelled the Jingo-kind:

What said the wounded, the maimed and blind?

'Fight on!' the Armament-kings besought:

Nobody asked what the women thought. (1-8)

Her poem criticizes the way in which these people wanted to continue with their 'glorious' war without asking the opinion of the ones who are most severely affected by it, namely civilians and soldiers. Whereas these war lords are still enthusiastic about the war, the people who are being ignored will most likely be the first ones to show resistance.

In their anti-war poetry, female poets did not only promote pacifist ideas or challenge the policy of the war authorities, they also contested the traditional idea that women have to admire the soldiers who fought bravely on the battlefield and who died in order to save their country. In this view, the soldier was a brave heroic man who sacrificed himself for his nation. In Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1917), the ultimate example of an anti-war poem, this idea is challenged. He writes that it is not sweet and just to die for your country in a war. In this poem, which shows the harsh realities of warfare and which uses a number of sound effects such as alliterations and onomatopoeias to convey the experience of the trenches, soldiers die in a gas attack and this is not a heroic way of dying at all. The soldier sees the dead bodies lying on the wagon before him and as he sees this he says:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood

Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest

To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.* (21-28)

In her anti-war poem (1921) of almost the same title, only this time with a question mark at the end, Elinor Jenkins does not present the horrible conditions of the trenches, which in itself is already a powerful challenge to the idea that war is romantic, but what she does have in common with Owen is that she also questions whether it is truly so heroic to die for your country. In this poem, a family is burying their dead son but instead of praising him as a hero, they are only angry with the fact that he had to die. Some families can console themselves with the idea that their son died for his country's safety, but this family describes the blood on the man's body as "wasted life blood" (5). This family thus sees the death of their son as 'wasted', not as a heroic sacrifice for their country. The same kind of image is present in Margaret Sackville's poem "Sacrament" (1916), in which she compares the flowing of blood with the pouring of wine. In this poem, she also refers to the blood of the dead soldiers as "wasted" (14).

Finally, women poets did not only object to the female role of being an enthusiastic supporter of the war by writing anti-war verse, they also explicitly criticized this type of woman in their poetry. The best example of this is the poem "The Jingo-Woman" (1918), written by Helen Hamilton. In another poem of hers, namely "The Romancing Poet", which I have already discussed in the previous chapter, she also offered critique of one specific type of woman, namely the female writer who romanticised the awful war in her poetry. In "The Jingo-Woman", it is the patriotic women of the white feathers campaign who form the object of critique. In the first lines of the poem, the speaker's disrespect for these women already becomes clear:

Jingo-woman  
 (How I dislike you!)  
 Dealer in white feathers,  
 Insulter, self-appointed,  
 Of all the men you meet,  
 Not dressed in uniform,  
 When to your mind,  
     (A sorry mind),  
 They should be,  
 The test?  
 The judgment of your eye,

That wild, infuriate eye,  
 Whose glance, so you declare,  
                   Reveals unerringly,  
 Who's good for military service.  
 Oh! exasperating woman,  
 I'd like to wring your neck, (1-17)

What irritates this woman most is that the 'jingo-woman' "make[s] all women seem such duffers" (19). Because of her, men in the trenches believe that all women at home in Great Britain are jingoists who are actively shaming the men who had not enlisted. As Helen Hamilton proves by writing this poem, not all women in Great Britain were like this. What it is exactly that the speaker of this poem does not like about women who handed out white feathers is that they expect each and every man to sign up, without exceptions. She writes that "[m]en there are, and young men too, / Physically not fit to serve" (24-25). Yet, this woman still expects them to enlist, even though in some cases "they have been rejected several times" (29) by the military. She is not interested in the safety and well-being of these soldiers, she only wants them to enlist.

There are more poems in which female poets challenge the jingoist woman's belief that every man is fit for war. In her poem "A Volunteer" (1918), Helen Parry Eden introduces a man who is not a born warrior:

He had no heart for war, its ways and means,  
 Its train of machinations and machines,  
 Its murky provenance, its flagrant ends;  
 His soul, unpledged for his own dividends (1-4)

This poem's main critique is that even though this man is clearly not fit for war, they still want him to volunteer. At the end of the poem it becomes clear how the protection of this man's masculinity played an important role in deciding to enlist. Women convinced men to sign up by telling them that if they did not do this, their masculine reputation would be ruined. For this man, this specific way of convincing has worked. As we can read at the end of the poem, he is afraid that girls will shame him after the war for not signing up and it is this fear, not any patriotic feeling for his country, which made him decide to enlist:

Why had he sought the struggle and its pain?  
 Lest little girls with linked hands in the lane  
 Should look 'You did not shield us!' as they wended  
 Across his window when the war was ended. (11-14)

Another poem in which the male soldier is also not fit for war is Ruth Comfort Mitchell's "He Went for a Soldier" (1916). In this poem, the soldier is simply too young and inexperienced to go to war. "Bill, the Soldier Boy" (8) has no idea what war is like, only that it is glorious, and for this reason he soon will be completely disillusioned by his experience in the trenches:

Soon he is one with the blinding smoke of it –  
     Volley and curse and groan:  
 Then he has done with the knightly joke of it –  
     It's rending flesh and bone. (17-20)

The speaker argues that boys like him are not mentally ready for war and because of this they should not be asked by women to sign up, even though they are physically fit for it. This will not happen, however, and boys will continue to be sent to the front which is why, at the end of the poem, she asks herself sorrowfully: "*How much longer, O Lord, shall we bear it all?*" (41). According to Nosheen Khan, Mitchell's poem, which shows a clear kind of protest against the war authorities, "indicates that women were writing protest poetry before Sassoon and Owen" (15). Mitchell's poem was published in 1916, and it was only later in the war when the first anti-war poems by these two male poets started to appear. It is thus important to realize that not only did women write interesting anti-war poetry, they even did this before their fellow male poets decided to leave behind their patriotic and naive verse, and instead focus on more critical representations of the war.

When we return to Hamilton's poem we find another reason why she dislikes the 'jingo-woman' so much. She argues that women, who are safe at home and who do not have to risk their lives, do not have anything to say about whether or not soldiers should go to war. According to her, women are not allowed to dare soldiers to show their bravery and courage on the dangerous battlefields, when they themselves, because of their gender, are completely safe. As she says at the end of the poem:

You shame us women.  
 Can't you see it isn't decent,

To flout and goad men into doing,

What is not asked of you? (57-60)

The only ones who have anything to say about a soldier's decision to enlist or to refuse, are the soldiers themselves. In the end of the poem, the speaker makes clear that when no more men are left and this woman has to go to war, she is finally allowed to judge men for their decisions but until that time she needs to keep quiet:

So far they are not taking us

But if the war goes on much longer

They might,

Nay more,

They must,

When the last man has gone.

And if and when that dark day dawns,

You'll join up first, of course,

Without waiting to be fetched.

But in the meantime,

Do hold your tongue! (46-56)

## **Chapter 5: The Mother Figure**

As chapter two demonstrated, the embodiment of motherhood was often viewed as one of women's central roles during war. In wartime, women are expected to be "the Good Mother" (Elshtain xiii), giving birth to boys who will later become soldiers (Grayzel, *Identities* 86). As these little boys grow older, it is the mother's task to turn her sons into the tough kind of men who will protect their country in the future. Grayzel has observed that because of the great need for male soldiers in the First World War, motherhood was promoted by the British government (*Identities* 87). Women were encouraged to give birth to legitimate sons whom they, as proud and patriotic mothers, would sacrifice for their country's war (Grayzel, *Identities* 86). They would send their sons to the war and when these soldiers would die as heroes, it was their mothers who would mourn them, securing their place in memory. The propaganda poster with the text "Go! It's Your Duty Lad. Join To-Day" (see image 7), clearly illustrates this image of the patriotic mother sending her son to the war.

Chapter two also showed that women in general were also expected to represent the typical ideals of motherhood, even if they were not mothers themselves. As Grayzel writes, "motherhood" during the First World War became "the national duty and identity of all women" (*Identities* 5). In a time in which gender roles were sometimes completely subverted, something which I have already discussed in the previous chapter, "motherhood served as an anchor for stabilizing gender" (Grayzel, *Identities* 10). British women had to be caring, calm, gentle, empathetic and morally pure, and it was their job to take care of the male soldiers. Those women who were not mothers themselves could still fulfil a maternal role by nursing soldiers, for instance. It was this view of the nurturing, ideal and gentle mother/nurse who comforts her soldier children, which was frequently presented in propaganda posters. In the poster titled "The greatest mother on earth" (see image 11), for instance, we see a nurse holding a soldier in her arms, almost as if he is her baby.

The kind and loving mother figure which these nurses embodied, became the national female symbol during the First World War and in the poetry that was written during this conflict, she was represented multiple times. In this part of my thesis, I will analyse how women poets have interpreted the traditional figure of the mother in their war poetry. Apart from analysing their poems, I will also focus on soldiers' poems in order to discover whether there are differences in representation. I will argue that in both men and women's poetry, the mother figure can be a real woman who acts like a mother, or she can be the soldier's mother country. In soldiers' poetry, the mother figure can have either a positive or negative interpretation. Whereas in Wilfred Owen's poetry, she is an idealized mother who cares for her soldiers, in Siegfried Sassoon's poems, she has become the symbol of female naivety and ignorance regarding the war. By contrast, in women's poetry, it is the positive image of

the war mother from Owen's poetry which frequently recurs. Several female poets represent the mother as a kind, loving, and nurturing force in the soldiers' lives. The function of their poems is clear, namely to stress the importance of mothers in the war. At the same time, however, women's poetry about the mother figure goes much further than this positive image of the good and loving war mother. Whereas soldier poets like Wilfred Owen only focus on the positive side of being a mother during wartime, namely to take care of the soldiers and in this way feel as if they are really making an important contribution to the war effort, women poets also reflect on the negative aspects of being a war mother. In their poems, they express the pain, frustration and sorrow which mothers experienced when their young sons were taken away from them to die on the battlefield. This brings me to the second function of the mother figure in women's poetry that I will discuss in this chapter, which was to demonstrate the grief and anguish that British mothers experienced during the war. I will end this chapter with a third and last function of the mother figure in women's war poetry, which was to humanize the soldiers, not only the ones from Great Britain but also those of the enemy.

### **5.1. The mother figure in war poetry: Mother England**

In most war poetry, the mother figure is the epitome of maternal qualities. She is described as an ideal mother who stands for calmness and safety, and who cares for her children. In several poems, it is England, the soldiers' mother country, which represents the mother figure. One clear example of this is Laurence Binyon's poem "For the Fallen" (1914). This poem starts with the following stanza:

With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,  
 England mourns for her dead across the sea.  
 Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,  
 Fallen in the cause of the free. (1-4)

In this particular poem, England becomes a mother and it is the soldiers who are her children. The close relationship between this mother and her children is illustrated in the line in which the poem says that the soldiers were "[f]lesh of her flesh [...], spirit of her spirit" (3). They were her children and now that they are dead, she mourns her sons as any proud mother would.

Similarly, in Rupert Brooke's famous poem "The Soldier" (1915), it is also England who represents the soldier's mother. In this poem, the dead soldier is "[a] dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, / Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam / A body of England's" (5-7). England is personified as the soldier's mother since she "bore" (5) him. Apart from this, she also "shaped" (5)

her son into the man he has become. The memories he has of his mother are only happy ones. He thinks, for instance, about “[h]er sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; / And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness” (12-13). The poem mentions the things which this mother has given her son: “England [...] / Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam” (5-6). During his childhood, the soldier has received all the care and love which his Mother Country could give, and during the war it is his time to give something back to his Mother England, namely his life, which he sacrificed for his country.

In the two poems by Binyon and Brooke, the traditional protector-protected relationship between mother and child is reversed. Whereas normally, the mother is the one who protects her children and who sacrifices everything for them (Neumann 32), in the poems by Binyon and Brooke, it is the soldiers who gave their lives while protecting their mother. They have sacrificed their lives for her and Mother England thanks them by remembering them as heroes. In the poems written by female writers this image of the mother country also occurs. In Mary H. J. Henderson’s poem “An Incident” (1918), it becomes clear how soldiers have two mothers: their actual mother and their Mother land. The poem’s last line illustrates how soldiers died for their mother country:

For each son of man is a son divine,  
 Not just to the mother who calls him ‘mine’,  
 As he stretches out his stricken hand,  
 Wounded to death for the Mother Land. (21-24)

Just as the poem did a few lines earlier, it again compares the soldiers of the First World War to “Christ [who] is stretched on His Cross” (18). Just as “the Son of God” (19), the soldiers are “divine” (21), and they stretch themselves with their “stricken hand[s]” (23) on their crosses located on “the battlefield of pain” (17). Both Christ and the soldiers sacrificed themselves for a higher purpose, in the soldiers’ case “the Mother Land” (24).

In her poem “A Recruit from the Slums” (1922), Emily Orr questions whether it is so self-evident that soldiers sacrifice their lives for their mother country. In this poem, the speaker talks to the poor men who live in the slums, and she asks them why they want to help their country win the war when it has done nothing for them: “What has your country done for you, / Child of a city slum, / That you should answer her ringing call” (1-3). The poem concludes that the reason why soldiers from the slums decide to join the war is because of the fact that England is their mother. Even though she has not treated her poor sons properly, she is still their mother and they will fight for her. As the men from the slums say in the poem’s last lines:

'We thought life cruel, and England cold;  
 But our bones were made from the English mould,  
 And when all is said, she's our mother old

And we creep to her breast at the end.' (20-23)

This last line suggests that "at the end" (23), when the soldiers are wounded or dead, they will go back to their mother's breasts to find comfort there. It does not matter that she was not there for her sons during their lives. In the end, her sons will always come back to her in order to find safety and rest, just like babies. Orr's poem thus stresses the unconditional bond between mother and child.

## **5.2. The mother in soldiers' poetry: positive versus negative**

The positive influence of the mother figure on the soldier is characteristic for Wilfred Owen's poetry. According to Guy Cuthbertson, who wrote a biography about Owen, mothers frequently appear in his poetry and when they do, they are always celebrated in some way (132). In Owen's poems, mothers are idealized as a safe haven where male soldiers can find comfort, care and protection. In his poem "A New Heaven" (1916), for instance, wounded soldiers are returning home to England. The speaker of the poem is looking forward to his time back in England when he and his fellow soldiers will "live [like] gods" (10). When they are home, the soldiers will find comfort near "girls' breasts" (13) since they are "a clear, strong Acropole" (13). 'Acropole' here refers to the highest point in an ancient Greek city, on which a fortification has been built. When the speaker thus refers to the girls' breasts as an Acropole, he sees this particular place as a space of safety. The girls whom the poem's speaker refers to are most likely prostitutes who will comfort the soldiers by offering them sex, but because of the reference to the Acropole when discussing the girls' breasts, these women also become like mothers to the soldiers. In this poem, soldiers lie near the prostitutes' breasts since this is the place where they can feel the safety and protection of a mother.

In general, Wilfred Owen's poems demonstrate a positive attitude towards mothers and the important role they play for male soldiers as protectors, nurturers and care-givers. Siegfried Sassoon, on the other hand, was much more negative about mothers in his poems. The most famous example of this is his poem "Glory of Women" (1918), which I have already discussed several times in this thesis. In this poem, he criticizes the "mother dreaming by the fire" (12), who only thinks about the war in a romanticised way without realizing what the reality of war is. Another poem of Sassoon named "The Hero" (1917), which I have not yet discussed, also illustrates his negative attitude towards naive

mothers. In the beginning of this poem, the speaker introduces a mother who has just heard from an officer that her son has died. Even though she has received this bad news, she is still proud because she knows that her son must have died as a hero. In the poem's last two stanzas, however, it becomes clear that the officer lied and that the son is not a hero at all:

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.

He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies

That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.

For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes

Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,

Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,

Had panicked down the trench that night the mine

Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried

To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,

Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care

Except that lonely woman with white hair. (7-18)

In this poem, Siegfried Sassoon again condemns mothers for their naivety and their complete lack of understanding of what the war is truly like. Mothers in Sassoon's poems, thus become old, foolish and ignorant women who only believe in fantasies. At the same time, however, we also need to be critical of Sassoon's poem. In this poem, he blames women for not understanding the reality of war, but he also shows how the war officers were directly responsible for women's ignorance, since they told the women at home lies. Women believed in fantasies because this is what they were told by the officials. Instead of blaming the officer, Sassoon's poem praises him for hiding the truth and for only telling the mother "some gallant lies" (8). If Sassoon truly wanted women to have realistic ideas about the war, then he should have condemned the officer as well, not only the mother.

### 5.3. The ideal and caring mother in women's poetry

In the poems written by female writers, it is the kind, loving and nourishing mother figure of Owen's poetry which frequently returns. In contrast to Sassoon's poetry, women poets are mostly positive about war mothers. Just as was the case in Owen's poems, the use of breast imagery is important in the poems in which wartime motherhood is celebrated. According to Erich Neumann, woman's breasts represent the nourishing power of mothers (124). Apart from finding nourishment, however, male soldiers could also find safety, comfort and peace near a woman's bosom. This is illustrated in Alice Corbin's "Fallen" (1916) and Mary H. J. Henderson's "An Incident" (1918). Corbin's poem demonstrates how a woman's breasts served as an escape from the horrors of the trenches. In her poem, a soldier is wounded in the trenches and in a kind of dream vision he suddenly finds himself on the shore. This place has removed him from the dangerous male battlefield, and it has brought him nearer to the safe female home front. This immediately becomes clear from the description of the place. On the shore, "he heard a cock crow – children laughing / Rising at dawn to greet the storm of petals / Shaken from apple-boughs" (3-5). While he hears these happy sounds, he also still hears the "cr[ies]" (5) of the battlefield. As the following line illustrates, the shore has become a place of contrasts: "[w]reckage was mingled with the storm of petals" (11). The horror of the trenches is still there for the male soldier, but the poem makes clear that slowly the soldier is moving away from these trenches and he is finally finding his rest. This happens when he finds the breasts of an imaginary mother figure who can be either his real mother or his wife: "he / [...] turned again to find the breast of her, / And sank confused with a little sigh" (5-7). When he is at the woman's bosom, he relaxes and he forgets about his physical and emotional pain. This sense of safety and comfort is again stressed in the poem's last line: "He felt her near him, and the weight dropped off -" (12). The gentleness and comfort which this mother figure gives to the soldier also comes from the nature around him. While he is lying on the shore, "[t]he tide passed, and the waves came and whispered about his ankles" (2). The word 'whispered' indicates how Mother Nature is also treating the soldier tenderly.

In Henderson's poem, it is a female nurse who represents the kind and loving mother. While the nurse has become like a mother who cares for her soldier child by nourishing, curing and comforting him, just as his mother would, the soldier has become a little child who is completely dependent on his nurse mother. The patient in this poem is a young soldier who has severe wounds. His hands, for instance, are completely "shell-shattered" (6). The female nurse cares for this soldier by dressing his wounds and giving him food. In the description of this action, the poem uses Christian and maternal imagery:

I was making tea in the tent where they,

The wounded, came in their agony;  
 And the boy turned when his wounds were dressed,  
 Held up his face like a child at the breast,  
 Turned and held his tired face up,  
 For he could not hold the spoon or cup,  
 And I fed him .... Mary, Mother of God,  
 All women tread where thy feet have trod (9-16)

As Janet Montefiore has argued, “the scene itself is interpreted in terms of Madonna-and-Child iconography” (“Shining” 57). The soldier is like baby Jesus and the nurse has become Mother Mary, the ultimate symbol of maternal love and care. The nurse is feeding her soldier child with a spoon, but because of the soldier’s position near her breasts, he “[h]eld up his face like a child at the breast” (12), it is almost as if she was breastfeeding him. These two poems by Alice Corbin and Mary H. J. Henderson thus illustrate the importance of mother figures during the war since they are the ones who comfort the soldiers when they are in need of care and protection.

#### **5.4. The pain and grief of war mothers in women’s poetry**

The positive image of the mother as a source of comfort, safety and rest appears in many women’s poems. However, this does not mean that all poems only show the positive side of being a war mother. On the contrary, there are many poems which deal with the negative aspects of being a mother during wartime. These poems are mainly concerned with the pain, sorrow and anguish which mothers experience in the war. This pain already starts with the thought that one day, when war breaks out, they, as mothers, have to send their sons to the war. Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s poem “War Mothers” (1919) explains how this has always been women’s main role during wartime. This poem starts with the following two lines: “*There is something in the sound of drum and fife / That stirs all the savage instincts into life*” (1-2). According to this poem, war brings both men and women back to their basic roles. For men, this means fighting as warriors, and for women, it means bearing and educating future soldiers. This idea of going back to the basis is reflected in the rhyme scheme of this stanza, which is ABBA:

War had swept ten thousand years away from earth.  
 We were primal once again.

There were males, not modern men;  
 We were females meant to bring their sons to birth.  
 [...]  
 So they moved on and fought and bled and died;  
 Honoured and mourned, they are the nation's pride.  
 We fought our battles, too, but with the tide  
 Of our red blood, we gave the world new lives. (43-58)

What is interesting about this second stanza, is that the rhyme scheme has changed to CCCD. The first two lines are about men, and the following two lines are about women. With regard to the form, the two lines about women share a similarity with the two lines about men, namely the word 'tide' which rhymes with 'died' and 'pride', but they also contain one important difference, namely the word 'lives' which introduces a new sound. Formally, the poem's lines about women share a similarity as well as a difference with the lines about men, and this is also reflected in the content of these lines. Just like men, women "fought [their] battles" (57), but whereas men "died" (55), women "gave the world new lives" (58). Men fight and women bear children and in their respective roles, both of them inevitably have to make sacrifices: men have to give their own life, and women have to sacrifice their family: "[n]ow for his fellows offers up himself. / And we were only women, forced by war / To sacrifice the things worth living for." (23-25)

Whereas men sacrifice their own lives, mothers have to sacrifice the lives of their sons and as Lesbia Thanet's poem "In Time of War" (1919) illustrates, this was not always easy for women. Her poem is about "the loss experienced by mothers whose sons had progressed beyond the protective love of the wide arms of motherhood" (154), a theme which, according to Nosheen Khan, frequently returned in women's poetry of the time. In Thanet's poem, a mother thinks about how she had always thought that if her son would have to go to war, she would proudly tell him: "'Go forth: do gloriously for my dear sake.'" (6). She expects herself to be the patriotic mother who would gladly send her own son, whom she had cared for all her life, to the war, so that he can protect her. However, now that the moment has arrived to send him away, she is overwhelmed with fear and sorrow:

But now I render, blind with fear,  
 [...]  
 O You – so commonplace, so dear,

So knit with all I am or do!

Now, braver thought I lack:

Only God bring you back – God bring you back! (7-12)

She is no longer the brave mother who willingly sacrifices her son for her country. Instead, she wants to keep her son with her so that she can protect him. However, she does not really have a choice because if she keeps her son at home, he will be seen as a coward and she will not be the proud and patriotic kind of English mother who contributes to the war by sending her sons to the front.

Women have no other choice than to sacrifice their sons for the war and this is also reflected in other women's war poems. Teresa Hooley's poem "A War Film" (1927), for instance, is about a mother who realizes that when war breaks out, she has to give up her son for the war effort, whether she wants this or not. The poem focuses on the pain and sadness which this mother experiences when she thinks about the day when she has to send her son to war. Janis P. Stout has argued that the pain and fear which the mother in Hooley's poem feels, must have been very familiar to the British mothers who read her poem (73). The female speaker in Hooley's poem has seen a war movie in the cinema and as soon as she returns home to her little son, she overwhelms him with kisses. The movie has "assaulted" (16) her with the following "sudden terror" (16):

The body I had borne  
 Nine moons beneath my heart,  
 A part of me ...  
 If, someday,  
 It should be taken away  
 To war. Tortured. Torn.  
 Slain,  
 Rotting in No Man's Land, out in the rain –  
 My little son... (17-25)

She knows that when her little boy is old enough to fight, he too will be taken away and when this happens she can no longer love and protect him. Therefore, she kisses and hugs him all the time, because at this moment she still can. What Hooley and Thanet's poems illustrate is that the main reason for the mother's sorrow is that when her son is sent to the war, she is unable to protect him.

As it says in Katharine Tynan's poem "Joining the Colours" (1918), "[l]ove cannot save" (12) the soldier sons anymore. For these women, motherhood becomes incompatible with war since they feel that during war they cannot properly fulfil their loving and protecting mother role. As Joan Montgomery Byles has written, "[w]ar threatens the very maternity of women" ("Women's Experience" 483), since it requires mothers to do the opposite of what is expected of them in their maternal role: instead of shielding their sons from danger, they are now sending their sons to the place of danger, namely the battlefield.

Several poems by female writers illustrate that in some ways war was indeed irreconcilable with motherhood. War is represented as a situation in which sons are taken away from their mothers, and it is exactly this mother love, care and protection which is no longer possible. This is all perfectly illustrated in Vera Brittain's poem "The Only Son" (1918). In this poem, a mother is speaking to her "little child" (4) who is "far away" (1) from her. In the second stanza, she explains what her mother role before the war used to be:

I sought to shield you from the least of ills  
 In bygone years,  
 I soothed with dreams of manhood's far-off hills,  
 Your baby fears, (5-8)

She has always protected her little son but as soon as the war broke out, this was no longer possible for her. He followed his own path and left her passively waiting at home, unable to save her son:

But could not save you from the shock of strife;  
 With radiant eyes  
 You seized the sword and in the path of Life  
 You sought your prize. (9-12)

In one of her untitled poems written in 1917, Iris Tree also stresses how mothers were no longer able to be a mother during the war. The mother's breasts, "the stem" (11) from which all life, love and tenderness flowed to the sons, are now completely useless. In chapter three, I have argued that nature on the battlefields was represented in First World War poetry as dead and barren. In this poem, it is not nature which is unfruitful, it is the landscape of the woman's body which is left "barren and [...] unblessed" (12):

Of all the tenderness that flowed to them,

A milky way streaming from out their mother's breast,  
 Stars were they to her night, and she the stem  
 From which they flowered – now barren and left unblessed

Of all the sparkling kisses that they gave  
 Spangling a secret radiance on adoring hands,  
 Now stifled in the darkness of a grave  
 With kiss of loneliness and death's embracing bands. (9-16)

Whereas the two poems by Brittain and Tree focus on how the mother's life was influenced by the war, other women's poems pay attention to how the lives of soldiers were affected by the lack of mother love at the front. These poems represent the soldiers as little boys who are not yet ready to fight in the war, and who still need their mother's care. Before I will discuss these poems, it is first important to understand that the attention to the soldiers' young age returns in many of the war poems written by female writers. In almost all of the poems about soldiers, they are not older than twenty years old and they are always described as boys, children or, as was the case in Jessie Pope's "The Call" (1915), "laddie[s]" (2). In Isabel C. Clarke's poem "Anniversary of the Great Retreat (1915)" (1919), for instance, we can read about "the 'boy-faces' [which] / [t]he English soldiers wore" (9-10) when they went to the front.

The relative young age of British First World War soldiers is a central theme in the war poems of Margaret Postgate Cole. In her poem "Praematuri" (1930), she writes that for old people it is not so bad to see their friends die, since they are at least "happy with many memories" (5) and there is "only a little while to be alone" (6) before they themselves also die. For young people, however, dying is much worse because they still had a whole future in front of them. Whereas old people have happy memories from the past, young people's "memories are only hopes that came to nothing" (9). When their friends die, "there are years and years in which we shall still be young" (11). Another one of Cole's poems named "The Veteran" (1930) also deals with the young age of World War I soldiers. In this poem, a group of young soldiers are asking a war veteran for advice. At the end of the poem, they ask him how old he is. When thinking about the word 'veteran', one is inclined to believe that he will be an old soldier who has served in the army for many years. The poem seems to affirm this when it says that the "young soldiers" (3) are "[a]sking advice of his experience" (4) and the veteran answers by "t[elling] them tales" (5). However, in the poem's last line, which Janis P. Stout has identified as a

moment of “unexpected irony” (68), it becomes clear that the opposite is true for this veteran since he says that he is only “[n]ineteen, the third of May” (13). This ironic twist in the poem’s last line immediately confronts the reader with the hard reality of the First World War. In this war, it was not adults who fought, survived and then became veterans. It was mainly young men with whole futures in front of them who became the veterans of this war.

What is important about the mentioning of the soldiers’ young age in women’s poetry is that in the eyes of some women poets, soldiers are *too* young to fight. They are just little boys who have seen nothing of the world and who are still supposed to be in their mother’s care. Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s poem “He Went for a Soldier” (1916) is a good example of this. In this poem, “Billy, the Soldier Boy” (8), is marching away from town with his fellow soldiers:

He marched away with a blithe young score of him  
 With the first volunteers,  
 Clear-eyed and clean and sound to the core of him,  
 Blushing under the cheers. (1-4)

This soldier boy is too young to understand what the war is all about, let alone to fight in it: “[n]ot very clear in the kind young heart of him / What the fuss was about” (9-10). He goes to the war believing that he will be a brave soldier, but as soon as he enters the trenches, he becomes a scared “rat in the corner” (23). The poem indicates that even when he is dying it is “[s]till not clear in the poor, wrung heart of him / What the fuss was about” (33-34). This line indicates that the young boy had no idea what the war truly meant, but it can also be read as a more general comment on the futility of the First World War. The conclusion of this poem is that because the boy has no idea what he is fighting for, he, and all the boys like him, should not be sent to the war. In the last stanza, the speaker asks how much more “seas of blood and tears” (44) are needed in order to stop the deaths of young innocent soldiers. In this “protest poem” (15), as Nosheen Khan names it, the speaker argues that these young soldiers should be safe at home with their mothers so that at least, they still have a safe and hopeful future for themselves.

The British war authorities at the time agreed with these women poets that boys were still too young to fight. In 1914, soldiers had to be 19 years or older if they wanted to serve overseas (“How did”, *BBC*). During the first months of the war, selection procedures were still very strict and only those men who complied with the official requirements were allowed to enter the army (Clouting, *Imperial War Museums*). However, as the war continued to be fought and more and more men died, the rules were no longer strictly adhered to (Clouting, *Imperial War Museums*). Many boys lied about their age,

something which was possible at the time since most people had no birth certificates, and in this way, they were able to join the British army (“How did”, *BBC*). After all, recruitment officers believed that “if the volunteer wanted to fight for his country and was physically fit enough to do so, why stop him?” (“How did”, *BBC*). In the First World War, there were approximately 250.000 boys under the age of 19 who had fought as soldiers (“How did”, *BBC*). The youngest British soldier who fought in the trenches of the Great War was a twelve year-old boy who fought in the Battle of the Somme (Henry, *The Telegraph*). According to one of his fellow underage soldiers, this boy was so small that he could not “see over the edge of a trench” (Henry, *The Telegraph*) and other soldiers had to lift him up so that he could see what was going on. Eva Dobell’s poem “Pluck” (1919) explains how young boys could enter the army by telling lies. The boy in her poem is described as a “child” (6) who is supposed to play outside with his friends, instead of fighting on the battlefield:

Crippled for life at seventeen.  
 [...]
   
 A child – so wasted and so white,  
  
       He told a lie to get his way,  
  
 To march, a man with men, and fight,  
  
       While other boys are still at play.  
  
 A gallant lie your heart will say. (1-10)

In women’s poetry, these young soldiers are not presented as adults who have transformed themselves during the war from boys into tough masculine men who no longer need their mothers. Jessie Pope’s poem “The Midshipman” (1916) about a boy “in his teens” (2) suggests that this was the case and that the experience of war would turn young boys into real men. The boy in her poem is so young that he does not even use his “safety razor” (11). He is still a teenager but “in action” (12) the boy shows himself to be “a sailor and a man” (12). Poems such as this one by Jessie Pope are rare. In most women’s poems, young soldiers act as if they are tough men but beneath the surface they are still little boys who need their mother. Contrary to what happens in Pope’s poem, these young boys are not shown to transform into men upon entering the war. The seventeen year-old soldier from Eva Dobell’s “Pluck” (1919), for instance, is “smoking his woodbine cigarette” (20), thus acting as if he is a real tough man, but when the nurse comes to dress his wounds, his true nature appears and he starts behaving like a scared little child:

So broke in pain, he shrinks in dread

To see the 'dresser' drawing near;  
 And winds the clothes about his head  
 That none may see his heart-sick fear.  
 His shaking, strangled sobs you hear. (11-15)

He wants to hide himself, so that outsiders will not see him crying, but he cannot deny that on the inside he is still just a little boy in need of his mother's care and love.

The female speaker talks about her young son who has died in the war. She believes that by sending him to the front, she, as his mother, has "done [her] bit" (19). Her son died in a brave action on the battlefield, but right before he died his tough masculinity disappeared and he once again became a scared little child who "called [his mother's] name" (15). This act of calling for their mother's name in stressful situations frequently returns in First World War poetry. In Eva Dobell's poem "Night Duty" (1919), a young wounded soldier is lying in his bed and while he is dreaming, he "murmurs soft and low a woman's name" (21). In men's poems, the soldiers' cry for his mother also returns. In Wilfred Owen's "The Last Laugh" (1918), for instance, the soldier calls for both his parents during an attack:

The Bullets chirped—In vain, vain, vain!  
 Machine-guns chuckled—Tut-tut! Tut-tut!  
 And the Big Gun guffawed.

Another sighed,—'O Mother,—mother,—Dad!  
 Then smiled at nothing, childlike, being dead. (3-7)

### **5.5. Humanizing soldiers through the use of the mother figure in women's poetry**

In the poems from the previous two sections, mother figures were used either to emphasize the importance of mothers as sources of comfort and safety during wartime, or they were used to express the grief and sorrow of war mothers. Another effect of the representation of mother-son relationships in women's war poetry, which I have not yet discussed, is that it humanized the soldiers on both sides of the conflict. This becomes clear when we take a closer look at Katharine Tynan's poem "Joining the Colours" (1918). In this poem, Irish soldiers are marching through the town and first they are described as "food for shells and guns" (2). In this second line, the soldiers are just objects who will be the target

of war weapons. In the fourth line, however, the soldiers are referred to as “[t]he mothers’ sons” (4). Not only does this make the soldiers much more human, it also makes their lives more valuable. Each soldier has his own mother who loves him and when he dies, he will not just be an object of food for the war machinery. Instead, he will be mourned by his mother and the rest of his family.

Two of Margaret Sackville’s poems demonstrate how the humanization of soldiers through the use of the mother-son relationship could also contribute to showing the human side of the enemy. In her poem “Quo Vaditis?” (1916), she stresses the common humanity or, as Nosheen Khan has argued, the “homogeneity” (33) of British and German soldiers. The British soldiers say that “we see / [t]he self-same light which kindles in our friend / Shine from the faces of our enemy” (10-12). The poem argues that in the end, British and German soldiers do not differ so much. Both of them are young and patriotic men who have received the call to fight for their nation, and that is exactly what they are doing now. In order to emphasize the similarities between both groups of soldiers, the last stanza introduces the image of the womb. It says that “[d]eep / We [the British and German soldiers] lie in the same womb” (14-15). In these two lines, the poem almost seems to suggest that the soldiers are brothers. They have shared the same womb which means that in their essence, both groups of soldiers are almost completely the same. It is later during their lives when these brothers have developed into each other’s enemies. Deep down, however, they have always had some essential things in common, for instance their humanity and their love for their mothers. Therefore, we could say that the British and German soldier still lie together in the same womb, even today, because there are still several basic human characteristics which, according to Sackville’s poem, they have in common.

Whereas in “Quo Vaditis?”, Sackville connects the soldiers of Germany and Great Britain, in her poem “Reconciliation” (1916), she brings together the mothers of dead German and British soldiers. In this poem, she uses the universal relationship between mother and son in order to demonstrate that even though these two countries are enemies, their mothers are still connected to each other because of their shared grief. It does not matter what their son’s nationality is, the mothers’ grief knows no boundaries and is able to bring these women together in their sorrow:

We who are bound by the same grief for ever,  
 When all our sons are dead may talk together,  
 Each asking pardon from the other one  
 For her dead son. (9-12)

Sackville’s poem thus indeed is about reconciliation, as its title already reveals. It is the universal mother’s grief for her dead son which binds the German and British mother peacefully together. Even

though their sons may have killed each other, they are able to show forgiveness and to support one another in their shared sorrow.

## **6. Conclusion**

In her poem “Pierrot Goes to War” (1917), Gabrielle Elliot tells the story of two lovers, named Pierrot and Pierrette, who are parting from each other because of the war. This poem ends with the following question: “*Pierrot goes forward – but what of Pierrette?*” (16). This question perfectly summarizes the gap in research about First World War poetry. Whereas male soldier poets, the Pierrots, have received much scholarly attention since the end of the war in 1918, female poets, the Pierrettes, were ignored for a long time. In this thesis, I have tried to redress the balance by taking a closer look at the poetry written by British women poets during World War I. In my research, I have focused on an aspect of women’s First World War poetry which has not yet been analysed, namely the representation of the relationship between women and war in these poems. I have discussed what the traditional ideas on gender and war were during the Great War, and then I have analysed how women poets responded to these conventional ideas in their poetry.

My thesis has argued that women’s poetry of World War I both confirmed and challenged the traditional ideas on women’s relationship to war. In my analysis of the traditional opposition in war between a male battlefield and a female home front, I have demonstrated how many women poets adopted this spatial division in their poetry. In their poems, they described the home front as a place that represented feminine characteristics such as calmness, safety, peace, beauty and love. The battlefield, on the other hand, was described as a masculine space in which toughness, action, bravery and heroism were the most important characteristics. At the same time, however, there were also several poems in which the boundary between the fronts was blurred. In these poems, the danger of the war was also present at the home front, for instance when an air attack took place. Other poems focused more on how the home front was sometimes present near the front line, something which happened when female nurses worked in the field hospitals. In these kinds of poems, the battle zone contained both male and female characteristics: there was the danger and chaos of the battlefield, as well as the female kindness and safety of the home front, something which was represented by the nurses. What was interesting about the poems discussed in this chapter is that not only did women challenge the traditional spatial division in wartime between men and women by writing poems in which the boundary between both worlds is blurred, they also wrote poems in which they explicitly contested the wall that separated soldiers from the women at home. In these poems, women disliked the safety of the home front, which made them feel locked up, and they expressed their wish to join the men on the Western front.

The chapter in which I discussed my analysis of the representation of the home front and the battlefield in women’s war poems, not only offered us insights into the relationship between war,

gender and space, it also provided interesting ideas on the link between gender and nature. In these poems, nature was gendered female and just as happened to the women at home, nature on the battlefields was controlled by men. This happened on the battlefields in France and Flanders, the place which belonged to male soldiers. In the poems about the battlefields, nature was completely destroyed and no living plant, animal or sometimes even man, was left alive. In Great Britain, on the other hand, the place where women were the main inhabitants, nature was represented as fertile. In these poems, nature is growing wildly, harvest is a success, birds are flying and flowers are growing. The poems which I analysed thus demonstrated a symbolical connection between women and nature. Whereas in the poems about the home front, nature represented love, kindness and safety, just like women, in the poems about battlefields, nature, just like women, was dominated and exploited by men. My literary analysis thus confirmed the ideas of ecofeminist theory and it showed how these theoretical ideas are perfectly applicable to war poetry.

In the second part of my analysis, I focused on how women responded to the traditional division between men and women's war work. Many of the poems that I analysed agreed with women's war work and they portrayed women workers, for instance nurses or munitions workers, who were satisfied with their job. In some poems, female workers even enjoyed their wartime job which offered them freedom and more money to spend. There were also some poems in which the speaker expressed discontent with women's role in the war. In these poems, women either challenged the idea that only men were allowed to fight as soldiers, or they argued why it was not appropriate for women to work in factories. In the second case, female speakers used their femininity, or more specifically their maternity, to argue against women working in munitions factories, since they believed that women's hands are only made to do woman's work and industrial labour was not part of that.

The poems discussed in chapter four and five have illustrated that there was also an interesting relationship between gender and nationalism in women's poems. In many poems, especially those from chapter five, the nation is gendered female and male citizens are asked to protect their mother country on the battlefield. In these kinds of poems, the speaker played with the soldier's masculinity and his duty to protect vulnerable women, in this case his nation. If the soldier was a real man, he would protect his nation, personified as Mother England, and only if he was a coward, he would choose to stay at home. Constructions of masculinity and femininity were thus used in women's war poetry to convince more men to sign up for the nation's cause.

Apart from the symbolical role as mother of the country, women had another important role to play in nationalism. During the Great War, women were expected to be patriotic supporters of the war which their men fought, and many female poets used their poetry to express nationalist

sentiments. The best example of this was the nationalistic war poetry by Jessie Pope, in which the war and its soldiers were glorified. At the same time, however, there were also women poets who defied the connection between women and nationalism. These female writers wrote poems that were not nationalist in tone at all. Quite the contrary, their pacifist anti-war poems criticized the war and its futility, or they challenged the view that it was heroic to fight and die in the trenches. In some cases, female poets even explicitly condemned the patriotic women who supported the war and who encouraged men to enlist. What these poems show is that not all women accepted their imposed role as patriotic supporter of the war. Some women poets rejected this role, and this critical and anti-patriotic attitude towards the war could result in them being seen as traitors of their country. At the time, these kinds of poems may not have been welcomed at all in World War I Britain, but nowadays these poems are definitely worthwhile reading and analysing since they show us how women writers have tried to redefine the traditional relationship between women and nationalism in their poetry. Women's poetry of the First World War has demonstrated how women writers not only tried to reconsider their connection to nationalism by distancing themselves from nationalist discourse, but also by proposing other models for women, the most important of which is cosmopolitanism. Several poems by women writers, most notably Margaret Sackville and Vera Brittain, contained female speakers who sympathize with soldiers and mothers from all countries, even the enemy. Instead of actively promoting the superiority of Great Britain, these poems suggest a more peaceful female attitude during war, namely believing in the equality and common humanity of all nations.

In the fifth chapter of this thesis, I have taken a closer look at the relationship between war and motherhood in women's poems. In this discussion I have argued that many poems adopted the traditional image of the calm and nurturing war mother. This literary mother figure was a source of comfort for the soldiers and this was mainly symbolized through the use of breast imagery. On the other hand, there were also poems which rejected the image of the patriotic war mother who willingly sends her sons to the war. Several women's poems represented mothers who were not so eager to send their sons away, and who would much rather have held their soldier boys in their maternal arms for the duration of the war. In these poems, motherhood became incompatible with war since women felt that during wartime, they could no longer fulfil their maternal role. We can thus conclude that the relationship between war and motherhood in women's First World War poetry is a complex one. On the one hand, motherhood was promoted during the war and many female poets responded to this by writing poems about loving and patriotic mother figures, but at the same time war also represented a challenge to motherhood since it prevented mothers from exercising their role, something which was reflected in the poems about the grief, anguish and uselessness which some mothers felt during the war.

The poems which I discussed in this thesis have demonstrated that women's poetry of the First World War cannot be placed within one category. On the contrary, women's poetry of this war represents an enormous diversity and it is this heterogeneity which explains my thesis statement. Women poets did not react in one way to traditional ideas on women and war. Instead, they gave us a variety of responses in which the conventional ideals regarding gender and war were both confirmed and contested. Both these reactions can be explained by taking a closer look at the historical context of the poems. During the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional notions on men and women's role in society as a whole, but also more specifically in wartime, were still deeply embedded in Great Britain. Women did not yet have the vote and many people still believed that women's place was in the home. These traditional ideas influenced the way people thought and acted, and by writing poems about women who conformed to their female wartime role, female poets simply did what their society expected from them. Another thing to keep in mind here is that women's adoption of conventional gender roles in their poetry was also influenced by the patriotic spirit at the time. Great Britain expected its citizens to support the war and to adhere to their traditional roles, and any challenge of these ideas could be interpreted as anti-patriotic. Women poets simply took over long-established gender roles in their poetry in order to prevent being called an unpatriotic traitor to their country. The more critical reaction in women's poetry towards male and female war roles, on the other hand, could be explained by considering the important influence which feminist activism had on British women during the beginning of the twentieth century. These feminists challenged age-old ideas on men and women's role in society, and it was exactly this kind of reaction towards gendered wartime roles which was present in some of the poems written by women about the Great War.

In this thesis I have also compared the poems written by female writers with those of male soldiers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and this has offered us interesting insights into the difference between both kinds of war poetry. Whereas soldiers' poetry was quite homogenous in terms of topics and motifs, women's poetry was much more diverse. Men's poems mainly dealt with the experience in the trenches and the way in which the soldiers would be remembered after the war. The only significant difference in soldiers' poetry was between romantic representations of the war, for instance in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier", and more critical anti-war poems, written by Owen and Sassoon for example. When we analyse Catherine Reilly's anthology it immediately becomes clear how women's World War I poetry was much more diverse than that of men. In this poetry collection, we find poems about, for instance, the trenches, the home front, military hospitals, munitions factories, religion, nature, peace, memory, sacrifice and commemoration. The tone of these poems also showed a great variety: women wrote poems that expressed pacifism, patriotism, criticism, and irony, as well as happiness, sadness, love, grief, anger and fear.

One way in which we clearly see the wider vision of women's poetry is in the perspective that both men and women adopted in their poetry. Whereas male poets mainly wrote from their own male perspective, women poets chose to write from different angles, including those of men. In the poems which I analysed, women sometimes presented the war through the eyes of men and in these poems, they successfully imagined what life must have been like for the soldiers in the trenches. Such a leap into the consciousness of women was absent in men's poetry. In their poems, women are only presented as an 'other' who is seen through the male gaze. In their representation of female characters, women are mainly presented as flat and one-dimensional. For example, in the men's poems which I analysed, women were almost exclusively described as either symbolical loving mothers or as naive fools. Any deeper engagement with women's feelings regarding the war or with the women who did not correspond to these two images, is missing in men's poems. In women's poems, male soldiers are of course also frequently the object of the female gaze, but the difference is that women, in contrast to men, show the complexities of their characters from the other gender. Instead of describing them as flat characters, they represented soldiers as complex characters torn between their own personal interests and those of their country. Contrary to what soldier poets did with their female characters, women presented a far deeper understanding and sympathy for their male characters. In my analysis I have demonstrated that whereas male poets like Sassoon judged their female characters on the home front for their naivety, women poets expressed much more understanding for their soldier characters who naively believed in the glory and sacredness of war. Instead of blaming these young and innocent soldiers, they saw the First World War in general as responsible for the naivety and false heroism of British soldiers.

If we exclusively analyse the poems written by male poets, something which has been done for a long time and in some cases even continues today, we only get an idea of what the experience of the war was like for men. Moreover, if we only analyse soldiers' poetry, then our view of women during the war will be totally wrong since it is always filtered through the male gaze which did not understand what the war was really like for women. If we truly want to understand the literary experience of the Great War from the perspective of both men and women, then it would be a better idea to analyse women's poems since they offer us the experience and perspective of both men and women. The comparison of women's poems written through the eyes of men, with those poems written by the soldiers themselves, something which I have done in this research, shows us that women correctly imagined what the war was like for men, since their poems about the trenches show many similarities with those written by soldiers. The only difference, of course, is that whereas men wrote from their own experience, women had to base their poems on their own imagination and what they heard or read about the Western front in, for instance, the media.

Women's poetry of the First World War thus showed some significant differences from soldiers' poetry and this indicates that women's war poetry should always be studied next to men's poems, because it will offer us new insights into the way in which the war was experienced and represented in literature. Women do not deserve to be excluded from war literature canons just because they did not fight as soldiers. War poetry is not only about what happened in the public space of the battlefield, it is also about how the war was experienced in the private sphere of the home, the space that belonged to women. Women's experience of the war was indeed different, but this does not make their literary contribution less valuable. In future research on war and literature, it is essential to also take into account the texts written by women since only in this way will we be able to arrive at a full understanding of the meaning of war for a country's history and culture.

By writing this thesis, I have tried to make a contribution to our understanding of the relationship between gender on the one hand, and war, nationalism and nature, on the other hand. I have analysed these links by investigating a large number of poems written by women during and after the Great War, and I have concluded that connections between these notions are not straightforward but complex, and that instead of being fixed, these relationships are constantly being reconfigured in women's poems. One final academic discipline that my thesis has made a contribution to is feminist research on the relationship between gender and literature. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote in their landmark study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), throughout literary history, which was defined by patriarchal power, "women have been repeatedly defined by male authors" (xii), and this is exactly what happened in the war poetry anthologies and studies that only included poems written by soldiers and male civilians. In my research, I have analysed how women writers at the beginning of the twentieth century have attempted to free themselves from this male literary gaze, and how they have tried to redefine women in literature through their own female eyes.

My dissertation has thus concluded that poetry written by women poets about the First World War, and also war in general, deserves more attention. During the last few years, some female World War I poets have finally received this acknowledgement for their work. Tim Kendall's recently published war poetry anthology *Poetry of the First World War* (2017), for instance, contains a number of poems written by women. A year later, in 2018, Lady Margaret Sackville, one of the most critical female war poets, received her own commemorative plaque in Edinburgh, the city where she lived most of her life (Ross, *The Scotsman*). Other war poets who have received their own small memorials in this city are Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves. One of the most recent recognitions of a female war poet happened during the centenary of Armistice Day which took place at the Tower of London from 4 to 11 November 2018. The choral work and light show that were presented each

night were inspired by a love sonnet written by British-American writer Mary Borden (Flood, *The Guardian*). These examples show that we are already making important steps towards the recognition of female war poets. However, if we truly want to recognize the value of these women war poets, more acknowledgement of their work is still needed in the future.

One way in which we can honour the work of female war poets is by dedicating more research to them in the future. Possible research topics include exploring the works of female World War I poets who have not yet received much scholarly attention. In her bibliographical study, Catherine Reilly has identified 532 female poets who wrote about the war. Thanks to recent studies on women's poetry of the First World War, some of these women have become recognized World War I poets, for instance Vera Brittain, May Wedderburn Cannan, and Rose Macaulay. However, there are still many female poets whose work remains overlooked and it would be interesting if future studies would analyse their poems as well. It would especially be interesting to take a closer look at the female poets whose work was not only forgotten because of their gender, but also because of their nationality. Just like most First World War poetry anthologies, Reilly's *Scars Upon My Heart* mainly focuses on the poems written by English women. Apart from a few American poets and one Irish poet, all women in her anthology are English. In future research, it would be interesting to analyse how female poets from other parts in Great Britain, for instance Ireland or Scotland, responded to the war in their poetry. Considering the presence of nationalist movements during the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in Ireland, it would be interesting to investigate how these women poets dealt with issues of gender and nationalism in their poems.

Another topic for further research on First World War poetry would be to step away from war poetry written in English, and instead focus on what French and German women wrote about this war. English war poetry written by women is slowly receiving more and more attention from scholars, but the female poets from other parts of Europe are still largely being ignored. Future studies can analyse the poems written by these women to see whether there are any significant differences in how British and French women, for instance, represented the war or whether there were actually many similarities. This kind of research can lead us to interesting conclusions about the common humanity of men and women from different nations during wartime, or they can tell us more about how social and historical contexts affected the poetry that was written during the Great War.

One final suggestion for future research is rather general, but it could be divided into smaller research projects. The First World War was said to be 'the war to end all wars' but as we all know, this was not true and since the ending of the Great War in 1918, more wars have been fought. In these wars, poetry again played an important role and it was written by both men and women. An interesting

topic for further research would be to compare this poetry with the poetry that was written during the First World War. These studies could focus more specifically on the relationship between gender and war in these poems, just as I have done in this thesis, but they could also pay attention to how, more generally speaking, the genre of war poetry has evolved since 1914-1918. One can investigate, for instance, the poetry that was written during the Second World War. As Catherine Reilly's second anthology named *Chaos of the Night: Women's Poetry and Verse of the Second World War* (1984) illustrates, women poets were also present during this conflict and it would be interesting to compare this anthology with Reilly's earlier published collection of First World War women's poems. Other future literary studies on war and gender can focus on more recent wars and conflicts such as The Troubles in Northern Ireland (e.g. the poetry written by Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley & Ciaran Carson), or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (see for instance Duffy 2009). Both of these conflicts have been represented multiple times in war poetry (Duffy, *The Guardian*; Broom vii), and this means that there is still a lot of interesting material to explore in future studies on war poetry, especially on the role of gender in these war poems since this has not yet received much scholarly attention.

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**8. Images appendix**

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