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Author(s): Nicoletta F. Gullace

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White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War

Nicoletta F. Gullace

On August 30, 1914, Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald, an inveterate conscriptionist and disciple of Lord Roberts, deputized thirty women in Folkstone to hand out white feathers to men not in uniform. The purpose of this gesture was to shame “every young ‘slacker’ found loafing about the Leas” and to remind those “deaf or indifferent to their country’s need” that “British soldiers are fighting and dying across the channel.”¹ Fitzgerald’s estimation of the power of these women was enormous. He warned the men of Folkstone that “there is a danger awaiting them far more terrible than anything they can meet in battle,” for if they were found “idling and loafing to-morrow” they would be publicly humiliated by a lady with a white feather.²

The idea of a paramilitary band of women known as “The Order of the White Feather” or “The White Feather Brigade” captured the imagination of numerous observers and even enjoyed a moment of semi-official sanction at the beginning of the war. According to the *Chatham News* an “amusing, novel, and forceful method of obtaining recruits for Lord Kitchener’s Army was demonstrated at Deal on Tuesday” when the town crier paraded the streets and “crying with the dignity of his ancient calling, gave forth the startling announcement: ‘Oyez! Oyez!!

NICOLETTA GULLACE is an assistant professor of history at the University of New Hampshire. The author would like to thank Tom Laqueur, Eliga Gould, Sue Grayzel, and Susan Kent for advice and encouragement on drafts of this paper. She would also like to acknowledge the staff of the Imperial War Museum for their abundant help in conducting the research. The research and writing of this article were supported by the Fulbright Hays Commission, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California, San Diego, and the John M. Olin Foundation in conjunction with the International Security Program at Yale University.

¹ “Women’s War: White Feathers for ‘Slackers,’” *Daily Mail* (August 31, 1914), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*

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Oyez!!! The White Feather Brigade! Ladies wanted to present the young men of Deal and Walmer . . . the Order of the White Feather for shirking their duty in not coming forward to uphold the Union Jack of Old England! God save the King.’³ Numerous women responded to the cry and began to comb the city placing white feathers in the lapels and hat bands of men wearing civilian clothes.⁴ The 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.⁵ Dr. M. Yearsley is one of many diarists who recalled that “young girls of all ages and styles of beauty, but particularly those of the type called ‘Flappers,’ were parading the streets offering white feathers to young men in mufti, with a fine disregard of discrimination. . . . [I]t is an established fact,” Yearsley insisted, that “one of these inconsequent children offered her emblem of cowardice to a young man on leave who had just been awarded the V.C.”⁶

Despite such vivid recollections, the white feather campaign has generally received only passing attention from historians of the war. Feminist scholars in Britain and America, influenced in the early eighties by the women’s peace encampment at Greenham Common, have focused almost exclusively on the much celebrated history of feminist pacifism.⁷ Responding to the work of Arthur Marwick, David Mitchell, and others,⁸

³ “‘White Feathers’ a Novel Method of Making Young Men Enlist,” *Chatham News* (September 5, 1914), p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Although white feathers were given out in many parts of the country, the practice was most common in London and in port towns where the long history of impressment may have created a culture favorable to such coercive practices. For a sense of the geographical range of white feather incidents, see Imperial War Museum staff, “Great War Index to Letters of Interest,” n.d., Imperial War Museum, London (henceforth IWM). According to one contemporary, the “idea spread like a virulent disease.” It is unclear exactly how the practice caught on, but it is probable that rumor, newspaper reports, and the depiction of the practice in popular theater and fiction helped spread the idea. See Francis Almond to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), May 25, 1964, IWM, BBC Great War Series [hereafter BBC/GW], vol. ALL-ANT, fol. 339.

⁶ M. Yearsley, “Memoirs,” IWM, Documents, DS/Misc/ 17, p. 19.

⁷ See, e.g., Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women’s Writings, 1914–64* (Iowa City, 1990); Catherine Foster, *Women for All Seasons: The Story of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (Athens, Ga., 1989); Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-militarism since 1820* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1989); Margaret Kamester and Jo Vellacott, eds., *Militarism versus Feminism: Writings on Women and War* (London, 1987); Jo Vellacott, “Feminist Consciousness and the First World War,” *History Workshop* 23 (Spring 1987): 81–101; Joan Montgomery Byles, “Women’s Experience of World War One: Suffragists, Pacifists and Poets,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 8, no. 5 (1985): 473–87; Anne Wiltsher, *Most Dangerous Women: Feminist Peace Campaigners of the Great War* (London, 1985).

⁸ Arthur Marwick, *Woman at War, 1914–1918* (London, 1977), pp. 35–36; David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War* (Lon-

who recounted graphic tales of female war enthusiasm, the Greenham Common school tended to dismiss the white feather campaign as primarily misogynistic propaganda meant to discredit women and hide the more significant achievements of feminist pacifists.⁹ Although recent work in women's history has shifted attention away from the exclusive focus on pacifism,¹⁰ feminist scholarship has nevertheless failed to produce any detailed study of the very issue so painfully emphasized in the older historiography: that of women's participation in the recruiting campaign, particularly their wielding of the language of sexual shame to coerce young men into military service.¹¹

The general exclusion of white feather giving from the feminist historiography, I would argue, is more the result of the shameful meaning this practice acquired after the war than of any absence of convincing sources testifying to its contemporary prevalence. Although Virginia Woolf may have been one of the first to suggest that the white feather campaign was more a product of male hysteria than of actual female practice, she has by no means been the last, and the continued skepticism surrounding this practice necessitates some discussion of historical sources.¹² The contemporary evidence consists primarily of local and na-

don, 1966). This tradition has also been passed down by word of mouth, in the form of anecdotal evidence that is often repeated but has not inspired much detailed investigation.

⁹ See, e.g., Claire M. Tylee, "'Maleness Run Riot'—the Great War and Women's Resistance to Militarism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 11, no. 3 (1988): 199–210; and Anne Wiltsher, p. 1.

¹⁰ Several excellent studies of women's involvement in various aspects of the war have recently appeared, showing the growing breadth of interest in the diversity of women's experience. See, e.g., Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994); Philippa Levine, "'Walking the Streets in a Way No Decent Woman Should': Women Police in World War I," *Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 1 (March 1994): 34–78.

¹¹ Most feminist work that has dealt with this aspect of female militancy has been in the fields of literary criticism and political science and has focused on images of women in literary culture. See, e.g., Sandra M. Gilbert, "'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War,'" in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, ed. Margaret Higonnet et al. (New Haven, Conn., 1987), p. 208; Helen M. Cooper et al., eds., *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989), pp. xiii–24; Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London, 1994), pp. 89–129; Jean Bethke Elstain, *Women and War* (New York, 1987), pp. 163–79.

¹² Commenting on the psychological basis of bestowing white feathers and its seemingly disproportionate historical legacy in the memory of those men who witnessed, experienced, or heard about these acts, Virginia Woolf noted that "external observation would suggest that a man still feels it a peculiar insult to be taunted with cowardice by a woman in much the same way that a woman feels it a peculiar insult to be taunted with unchastity by a man." Woolf rightly argues that the number of women who "stuck feathers in coats must have been infinitesimal compared with those who did nothing of the kind" but goes on to blame what she calls "the manhood emotion" for the exaggerated psychological

tional newspaper reports, literary sources (such as plays and stories), and admonitions to women decrying the practice and imploring ladies not to give out white feathers.¹³ By far the most abundant evidence, however, comes from postwar memoirs, diaries allegedly written during the war, but published after, and a collection of remarkable letters sent to the BBC by old soldiers forty-five years after the armistice, describing this painful experience to researchers compiling an anniversary special on the history of the Great War.¹⁴

effect of perhaps “fifty or sixty feathers.” See Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York, 1966), p. 182. Although Woolf’s psychological insights are profound, receiving a white feather was a much more common experience than she allows. In the BBC Great War Oral History Series at the Imperial War Museum scores of men and women wrote in telling of their experiences as receivers or witnesses of the white feather. In my sampling of this source I have found over 200 accounts of white feather giving. Considering that many of the recipients would have been killed or died of natural causes between the time of receiving a feather and 1964 when the survey was advertised, and that some recipients may not have seen the advertisement or chosen to write, Woolf’s estimation of “fifty or sixty feathers” seems very short of the mark. I have also found numerous accounts of white feather giving in sources unrelated to the BBC Great War Series. For a fuller account of the BBC source, see n. 14 below.

¹³ It also includes the occasional question in Parliament and one or two official reports pointing to the practice as an embarrassing nuisance in need of suppression. For some contemporary references to white feather giving, see *The Vote* (June 18, 1915), p. 648; *Clarion* (September 4, 1914), p. 12; *Daily Mail* (August 31, 1914), p. 3; *Chatham News* (September 5, 1914), p. 8; *John Bull* (April 3, 1915), p. 11; *Hole’s Illustrated Review* (June 12, 1915), cover; *The Times* (September 1, 1914), p. 1; Lechmere Worall and J. E. Harold Terry, *The Man Who Stayed at Home* (London, 1916); Helen Hamilton, “Jingo Woman,” n.d., quoted in Catherine Reilly, ed., *Scars upon My Heart: Women’s Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London, 1981), pp. 47–48; E. A. Mackintosh, “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” n.d., quoted in Peter Parker, *The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos* (London, 1987), p. 181; T. W. H. Crosland, “The White Feather Legion,” n.d., quoted in E. S. Turner, *Dear Old Blighty* (London, 1989), p. 69; A. M. B. Meakin, *Enlistment or Conscription* (London, 1915), pp. 10–11; Annie Swan, *The Woman’s Part* (London, [1916]), p. 170; Coulson Kernahan, *The Experiences of a Recruiting Officer* (London, 1915), p. 69; *House of Commons Parliamentary Debates*, March 1, 1915, col. 548, September 15, 1915, col. 91, November 16, 1915, col. 1708; “The Northcliffe Press and Foreign Opinion,” Cabinet Document 1184, November 1, 1915, p. 3; Public Record Office (PRO), INF 4/1B.

¹⁴ In May 1964, Gordon Watkins, the producer of a BBC series celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Great War, issued an advertisement soliciting responses from white feather women and the men they had shamed. In the ad, Mr. Watkins tauntingly suggested that “I doubt if any of these women will be brazen enough to admit it now,” and given the wording he used, it is not wholly surprising that his prophecy came true. The BBC was inundated with responses from men who had received white feathers, but the reply from women to an advertisement that proclaimed its intention to “deal with the lunatic fringe which existed at home during part of the war” was so low that I have found only two letters in the collection from women who claim to have bestowed white feathers. Responses from men who received white feathers and from women who saw them given, however, should not be dismissed out of hand because of the reticence of the givers or the recipients’ temporal distance from the war. As Mr. Watkins’ tone suggests—and many of the letters corroborate—claiming to have given a white feather during the 1914–18 war was by the 1960s a highly embarrassing and shameful admission. Mrs. Thyra Mitch-

Although postwar sources no doubt reflect the complicated mediation of time, what changed in the intervening years was not the description of white feather giving itself but the ominous frequency with which this practice came to be remembered and commented on by survivors of the war.¹⁵ My contention is that the practice occurred, much as described in both contemporary and postwar accounts, but that its meaning, seriousness, and symbolic load were greatly enhanced as the war drew to a close and people began to count the dead. Though always more acceptable rhetorically than in actual practice, the wartime context of white feather giving endowed this feminine affront with enough patriotic, romantic, and civic legitimacy to entice some bold and impudent women to brave disapproval and bestow a white feather. As the larger cultural landscape encompassing the white feather campaign gradually receded, however, the practice itself came to be remembered as an emblematic act of feminine betrayal, easily disembodied from the social context in which it had originally thrived. This essay thus examines one of the most contentious gestures of the war in order to look at the way the language of patriotism implicated women in the raising of armies while subsequently providing veterans with a concise rhetorical trope with which to remember gendered patriotism during the Great War.

“Women of Britain Say—‘GO!’”

The white feather campaign originated within a system of voluntary recruiting that vociferously called on women to send their men to war. Until the institution of conscription in 1916, recruiting propaganda relied heavily on a patriotic appeal that welded masculinity to military service and branded the unenlisted civilian as a coward beneath contempt.

ell, one of the two women who did write in, found herself in the *Daily Mirror* hailed as a self-proclaimed “chump,” and although the tone of the article was more one of astonishment over the admission than hostility for Mrs. Mitchell, such notoriety is not necessarily of the sort many women would have wished for. See “BBC Seeking White Feather Women,” *Daily Telegraph* (May 15, 1964), in IWM, BBC/GW, vol. APL-AYR, fol. 242; *Daily Mirror* (May 29, 1964), p. 7. The BBC advertisement was published in a variety of other newspapers, though not all of them even solicited letters from women.

¹⁵ Undoubtedly these letters, like oral history interviews, reflect the intervention of time and a new historical context, yet they offer insight into a set of practices as interpreted by a class of respondent that is too important to be ignored. Letters from the 1960s match closely accounts written in the 1930s as well as contemporary anecdotes and advice to women proffered during the war, implying that the commemoration of this gesture was not as mutable we might expect. I wish to make sense of this practice by situating it within the cultural context of the war and then to examine white feather narratives themselves as a literary form with historiographical and political implications. For an excellent discussion of the use of oral history evidence, see Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend*, pp. 206–9.

Women not only functioned in this campaign as the direct voice of conscience but appeared more subtly as the objects soldiers fought to defend, the rewards only heroes dared to desire, and as the specter of what a man might become were he to “show the white feather” and fail in his duty. Gendered conceptions of patriotism thus implicated women in defining the parameters of male citizenship, while endowing women’s traditional domestic, maternal, and sexual roles with an openly expressed importance to the military state.¹⁶ As John Oxenham reminded the women of the Women’s League of Honour in a war poem composed for that group:

O maids, and mothers of the race,
 And of the race that is to be
 To you is given in these dark days
 A vast responsibility. . . .
 Remember!—as you bear you now,
 So Britain’s future shall be great
 —Or small. To your true hearts is
 given a sovereign duty to the state.¹⁷

While Oxenham’s poem, and much of the literature of the League of Honour, referred explicitly to the beneficial influence on men and the nation of women’s physical purity, during the war “women’s influence” took on a specifically military function as it became central to the language of recruiting.

As early as August 1914 personal advertisements appearing in *The Times* accused unenlisted men of cowardice and effeminacy in the name of presumed female acquaintances.¹⁸ We have no idea whether these

¹⁶ For provocative discussion of gender, masculinity, and civic obligation, see Robert Westbrook, “‘I Want to Marry a Girl Just Like the Girl Who Married Harry James’: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 42 (December 1990): 587–614; and Nicoletta F. Gullace, “Women and the Ideology of War: Recruitment, Propaganda, and the Mobilization of Public Opinion in Britain, 1914–1918” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), pp. 62–109. An influential interpretation of the multivalent use of women in the promotion of war is found in Elshtain, pp. x–xiv, 106–20.

¹⁷ John Oxenham, “The League of Honour War Memorial” (London: League of Honour, [1914]), in IWM, Women at Work Collection (hereafter WW), BO6/2/7.

¹⁸ One personal advertisement tauntingly announced: “Englishwoman undertakes to Form and Equip a Regiment of Women for the Firing Line if lawn tennis and cricketing young men will agree to act as Red Cross nurses in such a Regiment.” See *The Times* (August 31, 1914), p. 1. Another advertisement asked for “Petticoats for all able-bodied youth in this country who have not yet joined the army.” See *The Times* (August 27, 1914), p. 1. Dr. M. Yearsley describes this appeal in his memoirs and associates it with the feminine practice of giving white feathers. See M. Yearsley (n. 6 above), p. 19. The Germans apparently made much of a personal advertisement where a woman named “Ethel M.” informed her lover, “Jack F.G.” that “if you are not in khaki by the 20th

taunts were actually written by women, though contemporaries generally supposed they were,¹⁹ and even those advertisements that clearly were not—such as the productions of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee—nevertheless implicated women in a recruiting rhetoric that hinged on a masculinized sexual identity policed by women and the humiliating threat of appearing unmanly. “It will not be very long before every woman in the country will be looking ‘coward’ at every man she sees at home,” *The Times* forbodingly warned. For the writer “has talked with six women, varying in station from servant-maid to marchioness, all of whom have asked why so many young and active men are seen around who do not appear to be doing anything about going to war.”²⁰

Recruiters, legally barred from resorting to conscription until the enactment of National Service in 1916, put much thought into the motivation of young men, appealing both to threatened masculinity and to sexual desire as means of persuasion. In this way, Henry Arthur Jones was using commonplace logic when he declared that “the English girl who will not know the man—lover, brother, or friend—that cannot show an overwhelming reason for not taking up arms—that girl will do her duty and will give good help to her country.”²¹

The incitement to such tactics was by no means unusual, especially during the first two years of the war. One recruiting leaflet addressed to “MOTHERS!” and “SWEETHEARTS” reminded mothers of Belgian atrocities and warned sweethearts that, “If you cannot persuade him to answer his Country’s Call and protect you now *Discharge him* as unfit!”²² A poster designed for the lord mayor of London put the same message even more bluntly. Addressing “The Young Women of London,” the mayor asked: “Is your ‘Best Boy’ wearing Khaki? . . . If not don’t *YOU THINK* he should be? If he does not think that you and your country are worth fighting for—do you think he is *worthy* of you? Don’t

I shall cut you dead.” The Germans, according to British sources, translated this as something closer to “hack you to death.” See *Times* (July 8, 1915), quoted in Turner, p. 70.

¹⁹ In *The Experiences of a Recruiting Officer*, for example, Coulson Kernahan launches into a philippic against “folk who inform me that this or that man ‘ought to go.’” This practice he attributes primarily to malicious and jealous women. Quoting a letter that is both anonymous and addressless, Kernahan assumes that it is from a lady and even paints an imaginary picture of her as someone who “was living in ease and comfort, if not in luxury, the preserver of which, and her own personal safety, she was more anxious to assure and to insure by sending other people’s menfolk to fight for her.” See Kernahan, pp. 54–55.

²⁰ “Public Opinion and the Laggards, Unpatriotic or Afraid,” *The Times* (August 28, 1914), p. 6.

²¹ Henry Arthur Jones to *The Times* (August 29, 1914), p. 9.

²² Duke of Bedford, “Recruiting Pamphlets and Leaflets, 1914–1915,” IWM, 325.1 NP K. 44699.

pity the girl who is alone—her young man is probably a soldier—fighting for her and her country—and for *You*. If your young man neglects his duty to his King and Country, the time may come when he will *Neglect You*. Think it over—then ask him to JOIN THE ARMY TO DAY!”²³

In this way, while “Women of Britain” were told to “Say ‘Go!’”²⁴ something as private as female sexuality took on a military significance at the expense of all those unenlisted men who appeared reluctant to defend its sanctity. While this poster and others like it were criticized in Parliament and in the feminist press for their blatant manipulation of gender, the state had nevertheless assumed the guise of a woman for the purpose of recruiting.²⁵

This propagandistic turn implicated women’s most intimate domestic and sexual relationships in the raising of the new armies. According to *The Times*: “Many correspondents point out that lectures are not the best means of reaching the workingman and that all-important recruiting agency, his sister or sweetheart.”²⁶ Instead, one such correspondent suggested in a metaphor that melded women and recruiting posters: “Show their eyes.” In this way propaganda, both in the deployment of gendered images and in its ability to instigate female behavior, turned women themselves into a form of propaganda. Ideal-typical notions of masculinity and femininity were key to this process since they represented both

²³ “To the Young Women of London,” IWM 4903, reproduced in Maurice Rickards, *Posters of the First World War* (New York, 1968), no. 23. This appeal further conflates the virtues of citizenship with the virtues of a responsible lover.

²⁴ E. V. Kealey, “Women of Britain Say—‘GO!’” Parliamentary Recruiting Committee no. 75, IWM 0313, reproduced in Libby Chenault, ed., *Battlelines: World War I Posters from the Bowman Gray Collection, the Rare Book Collection Wilson Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), p. 122; anonymous, “To the Women of Britain,” in *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War*, by Cate Haste (London, 1978), p. 54.

²⁵ Angelsey’s Ellis John Griffith, M.P., protested in August 1915 that “the walls of our country and the pages of our newspapers are defaced by official jibes and taunts at our manhood, some of these actually being addressed to women.” See *Manchester Guardian* (August 6, 1915). He was not alone in opposing tactics which called on women to do the dirty work of the state. *The Vote* denounced “an insolent advertisement that has been published in the daily papers putting ‘four questions to the women of England,’ and accusing men of having to be *sent* by them to ‘join our glorious army.’” *The Vote* (January 22, 1915), p. 472. And the Ministry of Information feared the influence such advertisements might have on foreign opinion, lamenting that “The *Times* writes that recruiting is deteriorating, that intimidation and flattery are employed alternately, resulting in scandals. The inciting to enlist through young girls, the presentation of white feathers (a symbol of cowardice in England) by excited women, are only surface signs of the national degeneration.” See “The Northcliffe Press and Foreign Opinion,” Cabinet Document 1184, November 1, 1915, p. 3: PRO, INF 4/1B.

²⁶ “A Fight to the Finish: Work of National Enlightenment,” *The Times* (August 31, 1914), p. 4.

the traditional values that the British were apparently fighting to defend and the modes of gendered behavior that seemed necessary to wage war successfully.²⁷ What came as more of a shock to many observers, however, was that many women, in turn, donned the aspect of the state as they used their own physical and rhetorical power in the service of the crown.

Although propagandists like Admiral Fitzgerald, Lord Esher, and Arthur Conan Doyle urged women to shun men out of uniform, to show contempt for the unenlisted, and even to hand out white feathers to men wearing mufti, the authorities showed almost universal horror when women actually practiced what many publicists themselves had preached. In the same lecture in which he exhorted the girls of the Women's League of Honour to send their men to war, Major Leonard Darwin made clear that he was "very far from admiring those women who go up to young men in the street . . . and abuse them for not enlisting, a proceeding which requires no courage on the woman's part, but merely a complete absence of modesty."²⁸ And the recruiting sergeant Coulson Kernahan, ordinarily a vigorous advocate of female recruiting, warned women that "the sending or offering of white feathers, so far from witnessing to your patriotism, witnesses only to the fact that you are unpardonably ignorant, vulgar, and impertinent. The woman (I do not recall a case of one of the other sex doing anything of the sort) who offers a man a white feather exposes herself, and not undeservedly, to rudeness and to insult. If she do worse than offer the feather personally and send it anonymously by post, she thereby classes herself . . . as what in the other sex would be called a 'cad.'"²⁹

Clearly, a rhetorical taunt and the threat of an emblem like the white feather were ideally meant to obviate the need of actually handing one out; indeed, that women heeded these calls was not necessarily the intention of those propagandists who made double edged appeals to such unlikely groups as "The Young Women of London." For Kernahan, actual demonstrations of the type of female behavior advocated in much propaganda appeared "unnatural" and mortifying when endorsed or performed by women themselves. "One meets, of course, a number of women who lie and lie shamelessly in begging off a son or brother who has already enlisted," Kernahan thus observed. "For these women and their racking anxiety one is sufficiently sorry to find it easy to forgive, but the woman I cannot forgive is the one who would turn even her

²⁷ See Kent (n. 10 above), pp. 12–30; and Gullace (n. 16 above), pp. 62–92.

²⁸ Major Leonard Darwin, "On the Meaning of Honour," a lecture delivered to the Women's League of Honour, 1915, IWM, WW, BO6/3/2/8, p. 6.

²⁹ Kernahan (n. 13 above), p. 69.

country's emergency into an opportunity to vent her vengeance or her spite either upon another woman, of whom she is jealous, or upon some man, who has perhaps shown himself indifferent to her charms. These are the women who remind one of Frances Willard's saying that 'the worst of some women is that they can never be gentlemen.'³⁰

Although Kernahan was able to forgive those women who attempted to shield their men, he could not forgive those whose recruiting activities he suspected of being undertaken for ulterior and self-serving ends. His distinction between women with "racking anxiety" for the safety of their men and those who used the country's emergency to wreak revenge on men "indifferent" to their "charms" reveals a deep suspicion about female patriotism.

The discrepancy between the behavior of women apparently necessitated by the war and a sense of womanliness that transcended necessity propelled contradictory observations on women's role in recruiting and placed white feather giving outside the boundaries of acceptability, as a sort of emblem of all that was wrong with female patriotism. *The Times* correspondent Michael MacDonagh was thus horrified when going home in a tramcar one night he witnessed the presentation of white feathers. "The victims were two young men who were rudely disturbed from their reading of the evening paper by the attack of three young women. . . . 'Why don't you fellows enlist? Your King and Country want you. We don't.' One of the girls was a pretty wench. She dishonoured one of the young men, as she thought, by sticking a white feather in his buttonhole, and a look of contempt spoiled for a moment her lovely face."³¹

Although MacDonagh worked for a journal complicitous in prompting women to acts of patriotic disdain, he was nevertheless deeply troubled as he witnessed a practice entirely in keeping with the sentiments endorsed by such respected authorities as the lord mayor of London. As they parodied the rhetoric of propaganda posters, the actions of these young women turned a ubiquitous call to arms into a monstrous distortion of femininity. Spoiling her pretty face with a look of contempt, the girl became emblematic of an act that marred that which should be lovely as it perverted the sentiments of both courtship and war.

MacDonagh's reservations were shared by a wide variety of observers, particularly when the victim was already enlisted. J. P. Cope remembered the fury of his wife when a similar incident took place while he took her to tea at the Mikado Cafe on Long Row. Mrs. Cope had been

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³¹ Michael MacDonagh, *In London during the Great War* (London, 1935), pp. 79–80.

disinfecting her husband's uniform and thus he was wearing civilian clothes when "3 young ladies passed me and placed 3 white feathers in my hand." According to Mr. Cope, "I said to her look what them girls gave me as I did not know what they was for." His wife then accosted them and "they told her I ought to be in khaki out in France and she told them they ought to be in a Munitions Factory making Ammunition for the Soldiers to defend themselves."³²

Ordering the girls to return to Long Row the next day, Mrs. Cope turned their misguided accusations into an embarrassing retort:

The next day we went down I had my khaki on then with all my Decorations . . . we met them . . . and stopped them and told them to give me the feathers back but they was too ashamed to do so we left them and went in the cafe and sat down they followed us and told my wife they would pay for our teas my wife told them that my Husband would pay for us as it would be an Insult to take their money they little knew what I had gone through in the first year of war always wet through from frost snow rain wounded at Neuve Chappel and how many battles I had been in I was wounded 2 and gassed 2.³³

Mrs. Cope's display of her husband in full regimental attire and her challenge to the women to give back the white feathers became the means by which she cast aspersions on the wielders of shame. Like women who refused to take seats offered by men out of uniform, Mrs. Cope spurned the offer of tea from the insightful women who "little knew" what her husband "had gone through in the first year of war."

Given the disapproval of observers ranging from Coulson Kernahan to Mrs. Cope, why did women persist in giving out white feathers, and what did it mean in the context of the war? To decipher the significance of white feather giving for those who literally or rhetorically wielded this remarkable taunt, we must turn to the romantic popular culture offered to patriotic men and women seeking entertainment on the home front.

Sexual Selection and Imperial Order

The inspiration for the use of the white feather, and its significance in the construction of masculine honor and feminine disdain, were borrowed from *The Four Feathers*, a popular imperial adventure by A. E. W.

³² J. P. Cope to BBC, May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. COC-COY, fol. 141.

³³ Ibid.

Mason first published in 1902.³⁴ The white feather of cowardice referred to the white feather in a game bird's tail widely regarded as a mark of inferior breeding.³⁵ In popular parlance to "mount" or "show" the white feather was to display signs of cowardice, since a properly bred fighting cock would demonstrate the aggression and tenacity valued in the ring. The symbol of the white feather thus bound together issues of sexual selection, bravery, and cowardice—a confluence highlighted in the novel, which had gone into four editions by 1918.

In the novel Harry Feversham, a young military officer who cannot stand the thought of battle, resigns his commission on learning that he is to be sent to the Sudan on active duty.³⁶ Suspecting the cowardly motives behind his resignation, three of Harry's comrades send him white feathers forcing him to confront the devastating truth of his own martial inadequacy. The emotional climax of the novel comes when Harry must offer an explanation of the incident to his fiancée Ethne. As the narrator dramatically explains, "[T]he dreadful thing for so many years dreadfully anticipated had at last befallen him. He was known for a coward. . . . It was the girl who denied, as she still kneeled on the floor. 'I do not believe that it is true,' she said. 'You could not look me in the face so steadily were it true. . . . Three little white feathers,' she said slowly and with a sob in her throat, 'three little white feathers and the world's at an end.'"³⁷

After returning her engagement ring, Ethne breaks a white ostrich feather from her ornamental fan and returns it to Feversham along with the three original feathers. As the narrator explains: "The thing which she had done was cruel no doubt, but she wished to put an end—a complete, irrevocable end; . . . She was tortured with humiliation and pain. . . . Their lips had touched . . . she recalled with horror."³⁸

This final act of humiliation at the hands of the woman he loves spurs Harry to redeem himself—a redemption possible only in the spilling of blood. On leaving Ethne, Harry embarks on a trek to the Sudan to save his former friends from rebellious Dervishes who have refused to submit to colonial rule. In Africa, his symbolic passage to manhood occurs when Harry sinks his untried dagger into the body of an Arab, infusing his sanguinary quest for personal courage with visceral phallic

³⁴ Francis Almond to the BBC, May 25, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. ALL-ANT, fol. 339.

³⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "feather."

³⁶ His mission is significantly to "avenge the death of General Gordon" by accompanying Kitchener's forces on the reconquest of Khartoum.

³⁷ A. E. W. Mason, *The Four Feathers* (London, 1902), p. 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

imagery. “A brown clotted rust dulled the whole length of the blade, and often . . . he had taken the knife from his breast and stared at it with incredulous eyes and clutched it close to him like a thing of comfort. . . . He ran his fingers over the rough rust upon the blade, and the weapon spoke to him and bade him take heart.”³⁹ As Harry caresses the dried blood of his victim—a testimony and proof of manhood encrusted on the very blade of his knife—the novel’s juxtaposition of sex and empire begins to emerge, vividly highlighting a number of cultural assumptions that underlay the bestowal of the white feather of cowardice.

In the novel imperialism and sexuality are intimately related since the masculine traits needed to satisfy the woman are the same as those required in the conquest of empire. After rescuing his comrades from the clutches of Dervishes, proving his willingness to kill and his indifference to danger and death, Harry’s redemption is complete and he is able to return the feathers and reclaim his bride. On Harry’s heroic return, Ethne treasures his redeemed white feather “because it was no longer a symbol of cowardice but a symbol of cowardice atoned.”⁴⁰ The mock order of the white feather becomes instead the true badge of courage, as Harry’s atonement allows for the rehabilitation of his name and his reintegration into the society of his friends, his family, and the woman he loves.

As both the symbol of Harry’s humiliation and the instrument of his redemption, the white feather endows womanly scorn with rich creative possibilities. For wartime enthusiasts, the objective of giving a white feather was thus not only to shame a man but to change him as well, and as numerous men later testified, it could be wielded with a certain amount of patriotic self-righteousness by those would-be Ethnes who regarded a slacker as an affront to the ideal of manhood itself.⁴¹ A. M. Woodward perfectly summed up this attitude when she wrote to *The Times* to remind women that “there is a wider duty than making garments. . . . Young men must be persuaded to think what this war really means. . . . So I am commencing a little missionary work. To-morrow I mean to give a leaflet to every man who is apparently a possible recruit. I shall watch for them on the tram, in the street, at cricket and tennis grounds, at the theater, at the restaurant; and I hope that the little single

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

⁴¹ Alfred Allen, a young munitions worker, and his friend Christopher Crow were attacked by an indignant white feather woman in 1915. Although the incident left Allen “too shocked to move,” his workmate “roared like a wanton bull as she took hold of his lapel.” The woman was led away “shouting at the top of her voice ‘If the cap fits wear it!’” See Alfred Allen to BBC, May 31, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. ALL-ANT, fol. 263.

appeal 'from the women of England' will at least rouse their thought and will possibly help them to act."⁴²

While leaflets, rather than feathers, were Woodward's symbolic medium, her faith in the creative power of womanly censure is abundantly clear. If Woodward compared herself to a missionary, however, such evangelism often had decidedly sexual overtones as well. In a sort of inversion of "khaki fever," scorning a coward can be read as the other side of loving a hero—a potentially transformative demonstration of that female patriotism so seductively displayed by Mason's heroine.⁴³

Indeed, the imperial/sexual assumptions evident in *The Four Feathers* pervaded both the language of patriotic femininity and the ideal of romantic love during the war. If courage was the key to both sexual selection and the conquest of empire, every woman's imperial/eugenic task was to love a soldier and scorn a coward.⁴⁴ As the *Girl's Own Paper* solemnly explained, "Women will forgive almost anything in a man except cowardice and treason." For "not only is this feeling instinctive, but it comes to her through long years of human evolution. . . . With hearts full but tranquil souls, women can send forth their sons, their husbands, their sweethearts, their protectors, to danger or to death—to anything saving halting and dishonour. A great Admiral put it neatly when he said 'victory was won by the woman behind the man behind the gun.'" ⁴⁵

In the suggestion that both women and war demanded the same qualities out of a man, female sexuality became central to contemporary understanding of the forging of martial identity. "The soul's armour is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has braced it," the Mother's Union warned, "and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honour of manhood fails."⁴⁶

During the war, female journalists, music hall entertainers, and an array of patriotic publicists of both sexes popularized these sentiments by articulating women's military purpose in terms of their sexual and moral power over men. Indeed, if the act of bestowing a white feather

⁴² *The Times* (August 28, 1914), p. 11.

⁴³ The dynamics and implications of "khaki fever" are well addressed in Angela Woollacott, "'Khaki Fever' and Its Control: Gender, Class, Age and Sexual Morality on the British Homefront in the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 2 (April 1994): 325–47.

⁴⁴ For an interesting discussion of the idea of sexual selection in Victorian culture, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London, 1983), pp. 210–35; and Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction between Biological and Social Theory* (Sussex, 1980), pp. 99–120.

⁴⁵ "Women and Patriotism," *Girl's Own Paper*, vol. 1914–1915, p. 36.

⁴⁶ The Mother's Union, *To British Mothers: How They Can Help Enlistment, by One of Them* (London, n.d.), p. 1.

required no words to be understood, it may have been because contemporary discourse about women's influence gave unmistakable meaning to a gesture that invested feminine discrimination with explicit military utility. When the Baroness Orczy, author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, called for the "First Hundred Thousand" female recruiters to join her "Active Service League" in 1914, she made explicit the logic latent in such patriotic acts of feminine disdain.⁴⁷ "Women and Girls of England—Your hour has come!," the Baroness declared. "The great hour when to the question . . . 'what can I do?' your country has at last given an answer: 'Women and girls of England' she says, 'I want your men, your sweethearts, your brothers, your sons, your friends. . . . Will you use your influence that they should respond one and all?' . . . Women and girls of England, you cannot shoulder a rifle, but you *can* actually serve her in the way she needs most. Give her the men whom she wants . . . use all the influence you possess to urge him to serve his country."⁴⁸

The baroness posed the influencing of men as literally a form of "active service" for women and offered a military style badge and a place on the League's "Roll of Honour" to any woman or girl who pledged to "persuade every man I know to offer his service . . . and never to be seen in public with any man who being in every way fit and free . . . has refused to respond to his country's call."⁴⁹ The baroness succeeded in enrolling 20,000 women and for her efforts received a letter of commendation from the king.⁵⁰ Yet Orczy was merely one of a multitude of commentators and patriots who bade women to persuade their men to enlist and to scorn those who refused.

To Orczy, the withdrawing of the feminine body—in the refusal to be seen in public with a man out of uniform—worked in conjunction with moral coercion to isolate the man who refused to enlist. Her assumption seems to have been that what persuasion and female patriotism could not achieve, sexual desire and public shame could. If the presence of women were contingent on the wearing of a uniform, the purpose of the League was to assure that the signs of military and sexual prowess would be worn together or not at all.

As patriotic women's groups posed the raising of recruits as a form of military service for women—a patriotic duty comparable, according

⁴⁷ The Baroness Orczy, "To the Women of England, the Answer to 'What Can I Do?' . . .," *Daily Mail* (September 4, 1914).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The Baroness Orczy to Miss Conway of the Imperial War Museum, [1918], in IWM, WW, BO/6/6/2i. The Baroness's League was reputed to have raised 600,000 men for the king's army.

to the Baroness Orczy, to “shouldering a rifle”—popular singers, writers, and artists represented the soldier hero as a romantic ideal worthy of a woman’s love and hopeful of her body. Highlighting the distinction between the sexually attractive recruit and the contemptible slacker,⁵¹ female music hall stars such as Vesta Tilly and Clara Butt became famous for their sexualized recruiting songs and their erotic impact on enlistment.⁵² At venues ranging from local music halls to the carnivalesque recruiting rallies of Horatio Bottomley, the alleged contingency of love on war dominated the period of voluntary recruiting, turning military service itself into a sort of national aphrodisiac.⁵³ In the most famous recruiting song of the war, women explained that, “Now your country calls you to play your part in war / and no matter what befalls you we shall love you all the more. . . . Oh, we don’t want to lose you / But we think you ought to go, . . . / We shall want you and miss you / But with all our might and main / We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you / when you come back again.”⁵⁴

In the song, women offer their love and kisses as men’s reward for going to war, yet in many music hall songs the sexual implications of soldiering were even more explicit. In “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” popularized by Gwendoline Brogden in “The Passing Show,” the artiste enthusiastically proclaimed to the audience her “perfect dream of a recruiting scheme”: “If only all the girls would do as I do / I believe that we could manage it alone, / For I turn all suitors from me but the sailor and the Tommy, / I’ve an army of my own. . . . [O]n Saturday I’m willing, if you’ll only take the shilling / To make a man out of you. . . . / I teach the tenderfoot to face the powder, That gives an added lustre to my skin. . . . / It makes me almost proud to be a woman, when you make a strapping soldier of a kid. / And he says ‘You put me through it and I didn’t want to do it / But you went and made me love you so I did.’”⁵⁵

The use of double entendres—in this instance comparing making a man face gunpowder to a woman applying face powder—played with the idea of the eroticism of war and its stimulating effect on female sexu-

⁵¹ For a pictorial version of this motif, see anonymous, “He, She, and It,” popular postcard reproduced in Parker (n. 13 above), pp. 192–93.

⁵² *John Bull* (March 6, 1915), p. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.* According to Francis Almond, “Songs like: ‘We Don’t Want of Lose You, but We Think You Ought to Go. . .’ and ‘On Monday I Walk out with a Soldier. . .’ were rendered by women vocalists throughout the land.” See Mr. Francis Almond to the BBC, May 1964, vol. ALL-ANT, fol. 339. See also Woollacott, “Khaki Fever,” pp. 325–27.

⁵⁴ Tony Howarth, ed., *Joe Soap’s Army Song Book*, IWM Great War Series (London, 1976), p. 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

ality. In making a soldier the woman makes a man and in making a man she conversely creates a soldier; this transformative power in itself becomes a source of erotic pleasure as the singer flaunts her ability to counter a man's volition by stimulating his desire. As the song's reluctant recruit puts it: "'You put me through it and I didn't want to do it / But you went and made me love you so I did.'"

Female entertainers themselves frequently tried to recruit men from the audience in the highly patriotic atmosphere of the music hall.⁵⁶ Major D. K. Patterson, an "Old Contemptible" home on leave in 1915, went to the Royal Hippodrome in Belfast where a comedienne sang "We Don't Want to Lose You" directly to him. The mirth of the company surprised the vocalist who, much to Major Patterson's satisfaction, burst into tears on being told that he was already in the army.⁵⁷

The longing to transform men into soldiers and the virtual identification of erotic masculinity and martial prowess was as evident in popular women's fiction as in bawdy music hall lyrics. In September of 1914, for example, *Women's World* began a serial called "A Soldier's Wife," which ran with the sensational advertisement: "Amy Had Married the Only Coward in France." Through a mistake, Amy believes that she was saved from a fire by Jules and marries him instead of the true hero Jack. After marrying Jules, Amy discovers her mistake. To the humiliation of Amy and Jules's mother, "a gallant old lady who loved her son to the point of adoration [but] loved her country and her son's honour better,"⁵⁸ Jules tries to desert even before joining the French army. The concerted effort of the two women, however, finally gets Jules to the front where he shows his bravery and saves his marriage in the single act of performing well as a soldier.

Similar motifs appeared in popular women's literature even after the institution of conscription in 1916. In August 1917, for example, *Women at Home* magazine published a romantic story by M. McD. Bodkin, K.C., called "The White Feather." In the story, Molly Burton, "a

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the patriotic and conservative nature of the music hall, see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class," in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 179–238; and Chris Waters, "Manchester Morality and London Capital: The Battle over the Palace of Varieties," in *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, ed. Peter Bailey (Milton Keynes, 1986), p. 158.

⁵⁷ Major D. K. Patterson to the BBC, [May 1964], IWM, BBC/GW, vol. LIN-LYO, fol. 328.

⁵⁸ Norah Kinnaird, "A Soldier's Wife," *Woman's World* (September 19, 1914), p. 262. Jules's mother was even commended by female readers in "Heart to Heart Chats." See "Auntie Jean" to the "Editoress," "Britain's Brave Women," *Women's World* (November 28, 1914), p. 559.

bright, pretty, warm hearted little girl and as brave as another” accidentally gives a white feather to a recipient of the Victoria Cross.⁵⁹ Molly is intensely drawn to posters “urging young men to join their comrades in the trenches, to fight for England and liberty against the ravishers and murderers in Flanders. Shirkers and slackers awakened her utmost scorn. . . . ‘If I were a man’ she said, ‘I would go at first call. I would not have other men out fighting for me while I skulked at home amongst the women.’”⁶⁰

Molly is troubled by the presence in the neighborhood of “a splendid figure of a man” who was not at the Front. Molly could not bear the sight of “the handsome young loungeur” for “here was indeed a slacker *in excelcis* for whom no excuse was possible to linger ingloriously at home while his compeers were facing the horror of war.”⁶¹ Molly’s contempt grows daily as she sees the handsome coward “lazing around Brighton, while England, through the medium of many-coloured and illustrated posters, proclaimed that every man was needed at the Front.”⁶² Finally, able to stand it no longer, she gives him a white feather snipped from her favorite hat.

The culmination of the story and the fruition of its sexual/military motif, comes when Molly is invited to a grand ball “for a military angel . . . Robert Courtney, most illustrious of Victoria Cross heroes [who] has been residing anonymously at Brighton for nearly a fortnight.”⁶³ Predictably, “the hero of the Victoria Cross was her slacker, still wearing the White Feather.” The revelation of his bravery solves the puzzle of how Molly could have found herself “in danger of loving this self confessed slacker” and culminates in the conflation of romantic and martial masculinity in the person of the hero. As the narrator explains, Captain Courtney “valsed [sic] as he fought, superbly.” In the final passage of the story he “caught her close in his arms, half resisting, wholly yielding, and kissed her on the lips. When she emerged panting and blushing from the close embrace without a word more spoken on either side, they were engaged.”⁶⁴ As the narrator reminds us, “Captain Courtney was no slacker in love or war!”

Sex, romantic love, heroism, and cowardice are all entwined in this story of misidentification. The girl’s patriotism and bravery win her the

⁵⁹ M. McD. Bodkin, K.C., “The White Feather,” *Women at Home* (August 1917), pp. 153–60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

attention and admiration of the man of her dreams, whose prowess in war is paralleled and mirrored by his prowess in love, just as his white feather foils his Victoria Cross. Though "The White Feather" is unusual in presenting a positive view of the practice of handing out white feathers relatively late in the war, it may offer some insight into the way women envisioned this practice themselves.

The story was published in a popular woman's magazine and is adamant in its depiction of Molly as a brave, enticing, and patriotic girl whose nationalistic gesture sets her on the path of adventure and romance. In doing something for her country Molly reaps rewards for herself, as an impertinence justified by the exigencies of a national emergency leads to her own engagement to one of the greatest heroes of the war. In the linking of patriotism and romantic imagination, the story offers some insight into why the categories of courage and cowardice, which became the foundation of women's romantic war literature, seemed to have inspired patriotic action in an assortment of women during the war.

In a context where waging war was regarded as the single most important civic task, the paradigm of courage and cowardice made it possible for women to envision national service in sexual terms. In turning women's romantic fantasies into supreme public duty, a variety of stories, songs, and patriotic appeals promised women a vicarious attachment to the front through the honor of the men they inspired, while elevating such amusements as the selection of beaux into tasks of national and imperial importance. This aspect of white feather giving comes across with remarkable vividness in a variety of accounts written by men who received white feathers during the war. Bill Lawrence, writing from an old peoples' home in Warwickshire many years later, remembered being upbraided by a lady milliner on a train for not offering his seat to a wounded soldier. "I got up straight away . . . and took my trousers down so far, I had a thick pad of cotton wool and a bandage I had had a *very* severe wound in the back . . . it was a bit smaller than a walnut and all jagged edged and poisoned." Mr. Lawrence then warned the woman that if he'd "been a nasty tempered man she may have got what they call a smack in the gab," but quickly notes that "she was a very good friend afterward" when she took him to her shop. Leaving the girl to manage the store, the woman took Mr. Lawrence to her room, "put a bottle of whiskey [at] the side of the bed took [off] all clothes and got in bed and said do as you like you earned it."⁶⁵

Although Lawrence's tale of patriotic female sexuality is seen

⁶⁵ Bill Lawrence to BBC, [May 1964], IWM, BBC/GW, vol. LAB-LAZ, fol. 275.

through the eyes of a man (and at a distance from the war that endows it with the complications of postwar oral history), he is not unique among those who remember a decidedly erotic dimension to female recruiting. About a year after the war had begun, Mr. H. Symonds was listening to a ginger-haired girl giving a recruiting speech at Hyde Park Corner. He was seventeen at the time but eager to go “so when ginger gently tucked a white duck feather into my button-hole I went off to the recruiting office and, putting two years on my age, joined up.” Although Symonds saw nothing unusual in this incident, he did believe that the experience was unique in one respect: “I believe I am the only recipient of a feather, who had it taken back by the giver and was given a kiss in return! . . . When, some three or four days later in uniform I again stood in Hyde Park and listened to ‘Ginger’ she recognized me and in front of the crowd round her stand she came up to me and asked for the return of her feather. Amidst mixed cheering and booing I handed it to her. She had tears in her eyes as she kissed me and said ‘God Bless.’”⁶⁶

Symonds’s account of the receipt of his white feather is quite rare. His ability to exchange the white feather for the kiss of a lovely woman turns what men generally regarded as a hostile taunt into an erotic event that won the bestower admiration and inspired the recipient to enlist willingly. As Symonds explains, “Few people realize that those women who gave feathers were not just flighty empty-heads, but had a far deeper insight into *mysterious man* than is generally supposed. I was wounded twice but never regretted the quietly given push from a girl that sent me to the recruiting station.”⁶⁷

Ginger’s insight into “mysterious man” and Symonds’s starry-eyed response to her red-headed beauty and tearful patriotism offer a rare moment of insight into the cultural configuration of female recruiting in its most erotic form. On the one hand, the event turned Ginger’s beauty to political use as she imitated the public call to arms now frequently on the lips of actresses, music hall stars, and other popular women who “coaxed thousands to the colours”; on the other, she drew on and, through her success, legitimated a romantic tradition of female patriotism initiated well before the war.

Although white feather giving is generally remembered as an event that excited enormous hostility, it is thus possible that at the time women like Ginger received a certain amount of now forgotten encouragement. Not only did both the official and the unofficial productions of the volun-

⁶⁶ H. Symonds to BBC, 18 May 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. SNE-SYM, fols. 427–28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

tary recruiting movement brandish female sexuality as a means of shaming men into uniform, but popular fiction, musical theater, and advice literature frequently asserted the military efficacy of sexual desire even after conscription made such incentives redundant. Those few women who have since commented on their recruiting activities remember feeling an anger toward men who appeared to be shirking their duty entirely in keeping with the sentiments expressed in vast sections of the press as well as by scores of patriotic Britons. As Mrs. Thyra Mitchell recalled years later, she gave a white feather to her acquaintance Jack Mills, because she “was very angry” and “felt he should be doing his bit.”⁶⁸ Within a social context where people displayed the most extreme hostility toward conscientious objectors, shirkers, and those regarded as cowards, and where few propagandists shied away from employing women to make these points, the white feather campaign should not come as an entire surprise, despite the criticism it intermittently provoked.⁶⁹

White Feathers and Wounded Men

In spite of the extravagant promotion of gendered patriotism in wartime popular culture, historical understanding of the white feather campaign has been shaped less by the domestic situation in which it occurred than by the manner in which those who survived the war perceived and committed to memory these civilian acts.⁷⁰ While receiving a white feather must have been deeply mortifying even in the heady days of “war fever,” an encounter that might have been dismissed as foolish, trivial, or vulgar in 1914 became part of a more ominous symbolic shorthand in the years that followed, particularly as increasing numbers of men were wounded in the war. Although men did not “invent” white feather stories, returning soldiers increasingly endowed them with ironic significance, especially when women’s insulting gestures seemed to suggest feminine oblivion to their own masculine pain.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Mrs. Thyra Mitchell to the BBC, April 16, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. MIL-MIT, fol. 479; and Nicholas Wall, “Notes on Telephone Interview with Mrs Thyra Mitchell,” May 26, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. MIL-MIT, fols. 477–78. For a fuller account of this episode, see Mrs. Mitchell’s interview with the *Daily Mirror* (May 29, 1964), p. 7.

⁶⁹ Vivid accounts of the treatment of these men can be found in memoirs and oral history interviews with conscientious objectors. See, e.g., IWM, Department of Sound Records, Oral History Recordings, “The Anti-war Movement, 1914–1918.”

⁷⁰ The cultural history of memory has become increasingly important to the history of the Great War since the publication of Paul Fussell’s seminal work *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; 2d ed., Oxford, 1978). For an excellent essay on the historiography of memory, see Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 1–6.

⁷¹ Paul Fussell and Eric Leed have both commented on the alienation soldiers began to feel toward those at home who seemed unable to comprehend their suffering. See

As we have seen, women's reading of the signs of manhood relied on that external emblem of courage—the military uniform. Though exemption badges, medical certificates, and armbands were meant to protect exempted civilians from feminine taunts,⁷² men frequently complained that these signs of goodwill were invisible to those patriotic women whose only measure of a man was the fabric of his clothes.⁷³ Not only did women sometimes mistake “starred” men for “shirkers,” but, in incidents that caused still more outrage, they inadvertently bestowed their tokens of shame on wounded men recuperating in civilian dress—a mistake that may have occurred as late as 1918.⁷⁴

For men resentful of the paradigm of courage and cowardice manifested in the marked distinction between the man in uniform and the supposed coward in mufti, masculinity was more than a series of external symbols but part of the essence of a man who had served or been willing to serve as a soldier or officer at the front. The ironic contrast between the authentic bravery of men who fought and women's sartorial reading of male courage thus fills narrative accounts of the white feather cam-

Fussell, pp. 79–113; and Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 44–48. For a brilliant discussion of the gender dimension of this problem, see Gilbert (n. 11 above), pp. 197–226.

⁷² According to Reuben W. Farrow, a conscientious objector imprisoned for “prejudicing recruitment,” during the war: “Railway employees had been given certificates of ‘indispensability’ temporarily. This resulted in a number of youngish men having their ‘call-up’ delayed. This resulted in certain women accosting them and scornfully demanding ‘why haven’t you gone to the front?’ So [a scheme] was instituted whereby a man could ‘attest,’ that is, signify his willingness to enlist, and he was given an arm-band to wear, thus silencing the scornful ones!” See R. W. Farrow, “Recollections of a Conscientious Objector,” IWM, Documents, 75/111/1, fol. 289.

⁷³ Mr. B. Upton remembered an incident where his arm-band failed to deter the scornful admonitions of women. According to his grandson, “My grandfather . . . was standing with a friend, both on war work, in the Strand; when a young woman rushed up and gave them both ‘feathers.’ He still has his original ‘war work’ badge, which the young lady, in her excitement, failed to notice.” See Mr. B. Upton to BBC, May 15, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. UDA-VOS, fol. 38. Apparently women's enthusiasm for khaki was equally great when it came to choosing their own fashions. For a fascinating discussion of women's relationship to military fashion, see Susan Rachel Grayzel, “Women's Identities at War: The Cultural Politics of Gender in Britain and France, 1914–1919” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), pp. 316–46.

⁷⁴ While the majority of those who received white feathers seem to have gotten them in 1915 (the gesture perhaps having caught on after its inception in 1914), the practice was still quite common in 1916 and 1917 and, though less frequent, was not unheard of in 1918. For this information I am grateful to the Imperial War Museum staff member who painstakingly recorded the dates of white feather incidents included in letters to the BBC. Although this evidence is fragmentary, excluding anyone who predeceased the BBC appeal, did not wish to write in, or failed to include the date of his feather story, it nevertheless refutes the idea that the practice was confined to 1914 and 1915 or that it ended with conscription. See Imperial War Museum staff, “Great War Index to Letters of Interest,” n.d., IWM.

paign, endowing this descriptive medium with rich retributive possibilities.

Michael MacDonagh's "well authenticated" version of the most famous of white feather stories vividly illustrates the way women's patriotic actions could in retrospect become their own revenge. According to his diary, "A gallant young officer was recently decorated with the V.C. by the King at Buckingham Palace. Later on the same day he changed into mufti and was sitting smoking a cigarette in Hyde Park when girls came up to him and jeeringly handed him a white feather. . . . He accepted the feather without a word and, as a curiosity, put it with his V.C. It is said he remarked to a friend that he was probably the only man who ever received on the same day the two outstanding emblems of bravery and cowardice—the V.C. and the white feather. Within a week he had returned to the front and made the Great Sacrifice."⁷⁵

In stories like MacDonagh's, women recruiters not only miss the signs of a masculine willingness to brave death—an exemption badge, a stump, or a wound—but in the most famous emblem of their wrong-headed activities they are unable even to distinguish courage from cowardice, the very feminine discrimination on which the eugenic health of the nation was supposed to depend. The official symbol of courage is bestowed by the king at the palace, the feminine symbol of cowardice is bestowed by a group of girls in the park; they are both orders, and the presentation of one mocks the bestowal of the other. The recounting of the tale thus avenges the gesture as the shame cast on the soldier is thrown back on the women who are narratively and morally hoist on their own petard.

As women used the uniform to identify the soldierly spirit and manly will inherent in every British Tommy, soldiers, military rejects, and conscientious objectors all began instead to assert personal suffering as the locus of true manhood. The language of the khaki uniform thus became highly ironic, especially in retrospect. As women, intoxicated with that enthusiasm for soldiers known as "khaki fever," saw in the glamour of the uniform the mark of a true soldier, men home from the front regarded this superficial remnant as only a vulgar symbol of the signs of manhood written on the body. P.C.S. Vince of Surrey remembered the vast discrepancy between the external emblems of military duty and the hidden wounds of battle to which civilians, particularly women, seemed almost incomprehensibly blind. Vince was wounded on

⁷⁵ MacDonagh (n. 31 above), p. 80. MacDonagh's book is a published version of the diary he kept during the war. I have not compared the published version with the original and do not know if it still exists. Such a comparison would be useful in determining the distance between postwar memory and more immediate wartime perceptions.

April 24, 1917, and was waiting to be admitted to Roehampton Hospital to be fitted for an artificial leg. He used to go to Victoria Station to await troop trains coming from France, and he went in his civilian clothes. On one occasion, however, his experience was different. A woman, who boarded the tram at Brixton, failed to notice his crutches and handed him a white feather. Vince reacted swiftly: "Having on my overcoat and my stump covered up, I did no more but stand up on my good leg and put my stump right into her face, and her reaction was awful and she did no more than flew off the tram."⁷⁶

As women read manhood in terms of the wearing of a uniform, accounts like Vince's continually spoke of brave soldiers, wounded men, and recipients of the Victoria Cross whom women mistakenly branded as cowards because they were out of uniform. Yet as men noted, if a uniform could be taken off the wounds of battle could not. These hidden scars—clothed and covered in the romance of a uniform or the ignominious attire of civilian clothes—were the indelible marks of manhood etched deeply into the bodies and consciousness of those who fought. Mr. J. Jones was thus furious when on returning home after being wounded in France he was presented with a white feather. "In those days there was a part of Clarence Pier call the 'Bull Ring' and we used to go there to try and get a girl," Mr. Jones recalled. "I saw a girl I liked and tried to get talking to her but she didn't seem interested and then I saw her talking to another soldier. So next time she passed, . . . I said 'you spoke to him why can't you speak to me?' She replied 'I don't speak to toy soldiers only those with guts, so you'd better have this' and gave me a white feather."⁷⁷

Jones promptly slapped her in the face whereupon her friend, a local dock worker, challenged him to a fight. "I opened my tunic and pulled up my shirt and showed my wound and told them I had only just come out of hospital after having been to France and done my bit. The bloke apologized . . . and the girl just ran off."⁷⁸

Although he wore a newly issued uniform, the girl rejected Jones as a suitor because the pristine condition of his clothes led her to believe he had not yet been to the front—an apparent deficiency that rendered him an undesirable object of love, unworthy even of address. The tale

⁷⁶ P.C.S. Vince to BBC, May 18, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. UDA-VOS, fol. 199. This is a very common trope. C. Ashworth was given a white feather while riding a train with shrapnel in his kidney, and both Reuben Farrow and Mrs. Ruth Brown tell of witnessing the bestowal of the white feather to amputees. See C. Ashworth to the BBC, May 18, 1964, BBC/GW, vol. ALP-AYR.

⁷⁷ Mr. J. Jones to the BBC, May 29, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, fols. 285–86.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, fol. 286.

is one of many that is about women's inability to read men, their attention to superficial detail, and their failure to tell a hero from a coward, even if this distinction should literally "hit them in the face."

In stories like these the uniform becomes to the body what language is to meaning—an inadequate approximation of a vast complex of suffering that women, irretrievably fixated with surfaces, fabrics, and colors, could never comprehend. Emblematic of the civilian lack of understanding for what lay beneath the khaki uniform, the actions of women became a narrative medium with which eloquently to display men's hidden suffering. As Reuben W. Farrow recalled of an almost metaphoric event: "a woman scornfully asked a young man in a tram car 'why are *you* shirking your duty?' . . . He quietly withdrew from his pocket a handless stump and showed it to her! In confusion she tried to apologize—and quickly left the car."⁷⁹

In this incident and others like it,⁸⁰ the silent response of the Tommy hints at the idea that the scarred body itself was simply a physical sign of the even deeper scars that could only be understood by those who understood the horrors of the front. If a man's clothes seemed to hide the meaning of battle written on his body, the body itself could show only an approximation of what he had been through as a soldier.

For those men who remembered the white feather campaign, however, hidden wounds were not just soldiers' wounds, but included also the psychological scars receiving a white feather left on many men who did not wish to fight. The advent of the white feather women thus appeared to MacDonagh to be "almost as terrible to the young male who has no stomach for fighting as an enemy army with banners—and guns. At the sight of them he is glad of the chance of being able to hide anyhow his diminished head."⁸¹ In this rhetorical turn, the emotional wounds inflicted by women at home mimic the physical wounds inflicted by the enemy in battle. Although MacDonagh is speaking figuratively, such metaphorical usage of the language of combat took a quite literal form in the recollections of many men who survived the war.

⁷⁹ R. W. Farrow, "Recollections," p. 290. Ironically, amputees and humpbacks were not to be issued armbands because it was imagined that their reason for being out of uniform was already graphically written on their bodies. See Lord Derby to Headley Le Bas, November 22, 1915, British Library, Add. MS 62170, fol. 182.

⁸⁰ Mrs. Ruth L. Brown vividly recalls the way such a moment of misrepresentation impressed her, though just a schoolgirl of ten years old: "A young man was sitting on a seat by the bus stop near Kent gardens, Ealing, . . . when a lady came up to him, said something, and passed him a small white feather. The young man took it, turning it about in his hand for some time, then, very quietly, moved his leg from under the seat and showed her his empty foot!" See Mrs. Ruth L. Brown to BBC, May 16, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. BRO-BRY, fol. 261.

⁸¹ MacDonagh, p. 79.

G. Backhaus tells the story of two friends of his who received white feathers, claiming that “unfortunately both the men I know who suffered that terrible [fate] died because of it.”⁸² Relating the story of how his underage cousin had enlisted as a result of female taunts and was “blew to pieces” and how an overaged friend of his “died of madness” as a direct consequence of these insults, Backhaus makes it clear that women, rather than the enemy, were responsible for these tragic deaths. As Backhaus concludes, in rhetoric reminiscent of that used to describe death in the trenches, “the look in his eye has haunted me ever since. . . . The cruelty of that white feather business needs exposing.”⁸³

Backhaus’s impression is not exceptional. Earnest Barnby also believed that such a gesture resulted in the premature loss of his brother who, in spite of his Derby armband, “was presented with a white feather by some scatty female and as a result was seized by a depression which developed into tuberculosis which killed him.”⁸⁴ And Granville Bradshaw bitterly claimed that his friend Basil Hallam, who was famous for his song “Gilbert the Filbert the Colonel of the Nuts,” was de facto killed by white feather women. According to Bradshaw, the two men were walking down Shaftsbury Avenue after Hallam’s show when “we were both surrounded by young, stupid, and screaming girls who stuck white feathers into the lapels of our coats. . . . When we extricated ourselves Basil said, ‘I shall go and join-up immediately’—he did. . . . I heard a few weeks later that my friend Basil Hallam had joined the paratroops and in his first descent with a parachute it failed to open. He was killed and he died during the afternoon.”⁸⁵

In these accounts, the emasculating attacks of women on the domestic front are comparable to the eviscerating assault of the enemy in battle. Insofar as the fear of one prompted men to brave the other, women and the enemy in some sense became one.

As the cultural landscape encompassing the white feather campaign was gradually overshadowed by the seriousness of the war, public officials, returning soldiers, and a variety of other responsible citizens increasingly saw this feminine affront as an outrageous disruption of public order rather than as an even marginally legitimate means of coaxing or cajoling men to the colors. In 1915 Cathcart Wason warned the home secretary, Reginald McKenna, that state employees were being “subjected to insolence and provocation at the hands of some advertising

⁸² G. Backhaus to BBC, May 15, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. BAB-BAP, fol. 18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, fol. 19.

⁸⁴ Ernest Barnby to BBC, May 19, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. Bar, fol. 393.

⁸⁵ Granville Bradshaw to BBC, May 15, 1964, IWM, BBC/GW, vol. BRA-BRI, fol.

young women presenting them with white feathers” and inquired whether he would authorize the arrest of “such persons” for “acting in a manner likely to create a breach of the peace.”⁸⁶ While the home secretary dismissed this extravagant request, its lavish rhetoric suggests a sense of outrage that would only continue to grow as the war progressed.

By 1916 changes in recruiting had distanced white feather giving from what rationale it once possessed. Not only did passage of the National Service Bill end official recruiting appeals, but rising casualties and the induction of large numbers of men into the army meant that women who continued to upbraid men out of uniform did so without official sanction and at increasing risk of making mistakes. While formal recruiting appeals ended with conscription, however, it is important to remember that public hostility toward unenlisted men in no way subsided. The press singled out conscientious objectors and “shirkers” for especial attack, while the practice of white feather giving continued intermittently into 1918, nourished by an increasingly bitter atmosphere of suspicion toward those apparently unwilling to “do their bit.”⁸⁷

In this conflicted environment, women’s patriotic disdain became the source of particular resentment, despite the fact that they were by no means alone in harassing young men. It was Parliament, after all, not women, who disenfranchised conscientious objectors for five years after the war, and it was conscription, not white feather giving, that was responsible for sending thousands of hesitant youths to the front.⁸⁸ Why then were women singled out for especial reproach, particularly when only a small, if persistent, minority of them could have participated in this insulting act?

As quintessential noncombatants and as the conflict’s apparent political and economic beneficiaries, women, as feminist historians have noted, became an object of particular hostility in the aftermath of the war.⁸⁹ During the period of voluntary recruiting, white feather women

⁸⁶ House of Commons Parliamentary Debates, March 1, 1915, col. 548.

⁸⁷ John W. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience: A History, 1916–1919* (London, 1922), passim.

⁸⁸ J. Renwick Seager, J.P., *The Reform Act of 1918* (London, 1918), pp. 46–49; Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London, 1979), pp. 76–85.

⁸⁹ The debate over the “gender backlash” began with the feminist contention that women lost many of the economic gains they had made during the war in the postwar period. See, e.g., Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London, 1981). Recently the debate has been expanded to encompass the psychological and psychoanalytic dimensions of the backlash and the impact of the war on the “demise” of feminism. See Kent (n. 10 above), pp. 97–139; and Michelle Perrot, “The New Eve and the Old Adam: French Women’s Condition at the Turn of the Century,” in Higonnet et al., eds. (n. 11 above), pp. 51–60.

had crossed the boundary of acceptable female behavior in their enthusiasm to enforce what they and the majority of their contemporaries regarded as appropriate male behavior; yet the cultural environment in which they displayed these sentiments was gradually losing its legitimacy, particularly among those with some knowledge of the war. In an atmosphere of growing male resentment, white feather giving became the guilty emblem of women's complicity and a vivid medium through which men could remember and moralize on the meretricious relationship of the home front to those who served. Since strident female patriotism contrasted so dramatically with women's nurturing roles, white feather giving became the ironic symbol of a world gone awry—a world where husbands, sons, and fathers were sacrificed by the women back home.⁹⁰

White feather stories are thus both a description of what actually occurred and an aggressive articulation of masculinity that claimed for those who suffered exclusive custody over the interpretation of the war. In white feather narratives, male suffering becomes an alternative propagandist motif, drawn from experience, to be sure, but wielded in highly strategic ways to reassert an essentially masculine patriotism sacramentally distinct from the discredited female patriotism that once flourished at home.⁹¹ The spirit of the Somme, in this way, superseded the levity of the music hall, endowing bitter meaning on a gesture that, in retrospect, would dishonor the giver far more than the recipient.

In the process of remembering, the larger cultural context that explained women's actions receded as returning soldiers claimed the authority to interpret the war, its stories, and its evasive moral for themselves and their communities.⁹² Caroline Rennles, a young munitions

⁹⁰ Sandra Gilbert has observed that the efforts of women recruiters "reinforced male sexual anger by implying that women were eager to implore men to make mortal sacrifices by which they themselves would ultimately profit." See Gilbert (n. 11 above), p. 208. For a vivid account of the development and implications of these sentiments, see Kent, pp. 31–50, 90–91.

⁹¹ The wielding of these tales was not isolated to veterans, however, but could also be used by men and women close to a victim or by former pacifists who wished to vindicate their wartime stance. Perhaps the most strategic use of white feather stories was by the pacifist Sylvia Pankhurst who credited members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) with handing out white feathers during the war. The WSPU was of course run by her prowar nemeses and blood kin, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. According to Miss Pankhurst, "Mrs. Pankhurst toured the country making recruiting speeches. Her supporters handed out white feathers to every young man they encountered wearing civilian dress, and bobbed up at Hyde Park meetings with placards [reading] 'Intern Them All.' " See Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffrage Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London, 1931), p. 594.

⁹² For an excellent discussion of this theme, see Margaret R. Higonnet, "Not So Quiet in No-Woman's Land," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott (Princeton, N.J., 1993), pp. 205–26. In spite of the new "ironic" tone that

worker during the war, recalled that, being “very patriotic during the First War,” if she “saw a chap out in the street” she’d say, “‘Why aren’t you in the army?’” Indeed, she would taunt her unenlisted male colleagues at Woolwich Arsenal because the sight of them used to drive her mad. “I used to call them all white-livered whatsonames I could lay my tongue to.” By the Second World War, however, Rennles shunned such tactics and would not “have told anybody to go.”⁹³ While Rennles attributes her changed attitude to maturity, it was also the result of a new way of looking at war and male suffering that turned the risqué high jinks of the voluntary recruiting movement into the focus of embittered memory in years to come.

Fussell notes coming out of the war, writers like Robert Graves nevertheless preserve a number of martial conventions even as they criticize the romanticization of the war. See, e.g., Robert Graves’s treatment of his regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers: Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929; new rev. ed., New York, 1957), pp. 82–105.

⁹³ Caroline Rennles, IWM, Department of Sound Records, 000566/07, p. 10, quoted in Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend* (n. 10 above), pp. 197–98.