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French Volunteer Nursing and the Myth of War Experience in World War I

MARGARET H. DARROW

"IT SEEMS PARADOXICAL to unite these two words: woman and war." "Women and war . . . [I]f there are two words made not to go together, it is these two: war and women." The first quotation is from a speech to a women's organization in Paris in 1912, the second, from an article in *L'opinion publique* appearing early in 1940.¹ World War I had done nothing to clarify a relationship between women and war in France. Even the title of the *L'opinion publique* article, "Les femmes et la guerre," mirrored that of several World War I publications decades before.² Although a few writers had placed women "during" or, most daringly, "in" the war, as had Gaston Rageot in *La française dans la guerre* (1918),³ the most common connection was "and." Women and war could be juxtaposed, but what had the one to do with the other? Although the trenches of World War I ran through northern France, which meant that some French women lived in its midst, and although many French women worked to support the war effort directly, as munitions workers or military employees, for example, or indirectly, by replacing men in civilian jobs, those who made public opinion in France had difficulty envisioning a relationship between women and the war.⁴

I presented an earlier version of this article at the annual meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies in 1994. I thank the Whiting Foundation for helping to fund this research and Jo B. Margadant, Karen Offen, Mary Jean Green, and Lynn Higgins for their helpful comments.

¹ François de Witt-Guizot, *La femme et la guerre: Comment une femme peut-elle servir la France en temps de guerre?* Deux conférences données à l'Action sociale de la femme, Paris, 25 avril et 6 mai, 1912 (Auton, 1913); Hélène Français, "Les femmes et la guerre," *L'opinion publique* (April 19, 1940).

² Frédéric Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre de 1914* (Paris, 1915); Henri Robert, "La femme et la guerre," *La revue mondiale* (May 1917): 243–57; Henry Spont, *La femme et la guerre* (Paris, 1916); Louise Zeys, "Les femmes et la guerre," *Revue des deux mondes*, 257 (September–October 1916): 175–204. Similar titles include Berthem-Bontoux [Berthe M. Bontoux], *Les françaises et la grande guerre* (Paris, 1917); Maurice Donnay, *La parisienne et la guerre* (Paris, 1916); Jules Combarieu, *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre* (Paris, 1916).

³ Gaston Rageot, *La française dans la guerre* (Paris, 1918). Also see Comtesse de Courson, *La femme française pendant la guerre* (Paris, n.d.); L. L. Klotz, "La femme française pendant la guerre," *La renaissance politique, économique, littéraire et artistique*, année 5, no. 3 (February 3, 1917): 2564–66; Marie de la Hire, *La femme française: Son activité pendant la guerre* (Paris, 1917).

⁴ Although there have been a number of interesting articles about French women in World War I, such as Steven D. Hause, "More Minerva Than Mars: The French Women's Rights Campaign and the First World War," in Margaret Randolph Higonnet, et al., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, Conn., 1987), 99–113; and Marie-Monique Huss, "Pronatalism and the Popular Ideology of the Child in Wartime France: The Evidence of the Picture Postcard," in Richard Wall and Jay Winter, eds., *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 1988), 329–67, there is only one major study on French women and the war, Françoise Thébaud, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14* (Paris, 1986).

The main obstacle to conceiving of a feminine war experience—and it was a palisade rather than a stumbling block—was the purpose of the war for French masculinity. In “The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes,” literary critic Nancy Huston argues that the defining characteristic of war is its masculinity; war is the only human activity that signals masculinity to the same extent that childbirth signals femininity.⁵ And the centrality of masculinity to war (and vice versa) seems further heightened in societies that have recently suffered a military defeat, such as Germany after World War I, the United States after the Vietnam War⁶—and France after the Franco-Prussian War. Unquestionably, French society in the late nineteenth century experienced this humiliating defeat as a failure of French masculinity; the nationalist revival after 1900 was also an exercise in what Susan Jeffords has called the “remasculinization of culture.” Nationalists such as Charles Maurras, Paul Déroulède, Charles Péguy, and Maurice Barrès attacked luxury, capitalism, urbanization, secularism, feminism, socialism, democracy, modernism, Jews, Protestants, Freemasons—the list could go on—as alien “germs” of both degeneracy and effeminacy that had undermined the French fighting spirit. They couched national revival in terms of virility and rampant male honor.⁷ And this revival was to be achieved in combat—with Germany, of course—to restore France to the brotherhood of dominant nations.

For women to have anything to do with this next war, the supreme test of revived French masculinity, would obviously vitiate the whole point of the contest. Huston argues that women are always perceived as dangerously weakening and polluting to masculinity in war. This was especially the case in the French conception of the war that would be World War I. The initial French policy was to clear the war zone of women and to prohibit women, even nurses, from visiting it; the war was to occur in a zone of pure masculinity. The feminine should cease to exist. The shortage of titles placing women “during” the war and the even fewer that acknowledged women were also “in” or “of” the war reflects this concept: women did not exist “during” or “in” the war; their place was in a different spatial dimension, called in English the “home front” but in French, the rear (*arrière*), where, removed from the masculine war, femininity hibernated in a state of suspended animation.

In the late nineteenth century, the European powers and the United States shared a similar conception of gender and war and a rhetoric that elevated the relationship between them into the Myth of War Experience, as historian George Mosse has called it: war was noble, chivalric, and, above all, masculine. By transforming weak and callow youths into ardent, resolute men, war saved the

⁵ Nancy Huston, “The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes,” in Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 119–36.

⁶ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (London, 1990); Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Stephen Conway, trans., in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, 1987–89); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989).

⁷ Karen Offen, “Exploring the Sexual Politics of Republican Nationalism,” in Robert Tombs, ed., *Nationhood and Nationalism in France: From Boulangism to the Great War, 1889–1918* (New York, 1991), 195–209; Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, 1989); Annelise Maugue, *L'identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle, 1871–1914* (Paris, 1987); Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York, 1993); Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992).

nation from degeneracy and restored it to its virile tradition.⁸ In France, the discourse of the War Myth had become the signature tune of the nationalist Right in the 1890s, but in the decade of war scares that preceded the actual declaration of war in 1914, it played across the whole political spectrum⁹—and it left French women immobilized, frozen out of the discussion of the envisioned war. The only relationship the War Myth admitted between women and war was a hostile one, that of opponents to war, anti-militarists, pacifists, and spies.¹⁰ It is significant that today, the two women many French people associate with World War I are Hélène Brion, jailed for pacifism, and Mata Hari, executed for spying. This was the discourse that French women and their allies had to address before and during the war to claim a war experience for women.

The difficulty almost all commentators displayed in relating women to the war is evident in their ambivalent views of all the possible postures women could take toward the war, from the most traditional, of waiting, praying, and grieving, to the most radical, of donning uniforms and serving in the military.¹¹ Although commentators trivialized female munitions workers by calling them “munitionnettes,” many worried that they were, in fact, war profiteers, working not for their country’s defense but for the scandalously high wages, which they then wasted on luxuries. Women who did charity work for soldiers, refugees, or war orphans might merely be filling their social calendars with a pretense of usefulness. Women who “adopted” soldiers by correspondence mainly were interested in flirtation. Not even war widows were blameless; their mourning could be insincere—a mere fashion statement—or worse, excessive.¹² A truly patriotic widow would make sure her display of grief did not damage morale.

Of all these activities, volunteer nursing offers us the best example of the pervasive unease with any connection between women and the war. If it were

⁸ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

⁹ Eugen Weber, *The Nationalist Revival in France, 1905–1914* (Berkeley, Calif., 1959).

¹⁰ Joyce Berkman, “Feminism, War, and Peace Politics: The Case of World War I,” in Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sheila Tobias, eds., *Women, Militarism and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory* (Savage, Md., 1990), 141–60, discusses the common assumptions of the late nineteenth century that associated women and pacifism. But there was also a common association of women and treachery, exploited in a spate of fiction featuring female spies, such as Marcel Prévost, *Les anges gardiens*; Ernest Daudet, *L’espionne*; and L. Sollard, *L’espionne des Balkans*, all published in 1913.

¹¹ Unlike the British and American governments, the French military did not authorize uniformed women’s auxiliary services. However, it did employ women, in some numbers by 1918, and a few of these women wore uniforms, such as the women drivers in the military automobile service.

¹² Michel Corday, *The Paris Front: An Unpublished Diary: 1914–1918* (New York, 1934), 148; and Maria Léra [Marc Hélys], *Les provinces françaises pendant la guerre* (Paris, 1918), 7–8, criticize munitions workers as war profiteers. Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 26–30; and Maurice Donnay, *Lettres à une dame blanche* (Paris, 1917), 7–8, criticize charity ladies. Berthem-Bontoux, *Les françaises et la grande guerre*, 187, accuses women who volunteered to write to servicemen (*marraines*) of engaging in “a little romantic amusement, a self-indulgence in elegant flirtation that one hides under the cloak of charity.” Abel Hermant, *La vie à Paris (1916)* (Paris [1917]), 113–14, criticizes ostentatious widows. Marcel Boulenger, *Charlotte en guerre ou le Front de Paris* (Paris, 1917); Lucien Descaves, *La maison anxieuse* (Paris, 1916); Louis Narquet, “La française de demain d’après sa psychologie de guerre,” *La revue bleue*, 56, nos. 18, 19, 20 (September 21–October 26, 1918): 563–66, 599–602, 629–34; and Donnay, *La parisienne et la guerre*, all present thoroughgoing indictments of women’s behavior during the war, covering these points and more. André Ducasse, Jacques Meyer, and Gabriel Perreux, in *Vie et mort des français, 1914–1918* (Paris, 1959); and Perreux’s later work, *La vie quotidienne des civils en France pendant la grande guerre* (Paris, 1966), serve up these criticisms again, this time not as commentary but as History.



FIGURE 1: Sister Gabrielle in a military hospital, Clermont en Argonne, 1916. This was the image of the nurse that the French Red Cross tried to emulate. Courtesy of the Etablissement Cinématographique et Photographique des Armées (ECPA), Ivry-sur-Seine.

possible to conceive of a feminine sphere consecrated to the French masculine war effort rather than hostile to it, the nurse offered the best possible parallel to the soldier. In the iconography of posters and postcards, the begrimed, bloody, unshaven *poilu*¹³ is paired with the clean, solicitous nurse, white-robed and veiled: the masculine and the feminine in wartime guise. (See Figure 1.) The French government rewarded the valor of nurses with decorations; nurses were even sanctified if they died in the line of duty. Thus, of all the French women involved in World War I, nurses would seem to have been the most worthy, if not to stand level with the soldier in the national pantheon, at least to be included in the tableau in a supporting role.

In fact, the intrusion of the nurse into the war story barely survived the war itself. While the stone and bronze of war memorials and the pages of fiction and popular memoirs commemorate the trench fighter, nurses have disappeared from the national memory.¹⁴ Although praised at the time—Maurice Donnay compared Noëlle Roger's work *Les carnets d'une infirmière* (1915) to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*¹⁵—the personal accounts of war nursing published during and immediately after the

¹³ *Poilu* was the nickname of French soldiers in World War I, while the British were "tommies" and Americans "doughboys."

¹⁴ Annette Becker, *Les monuments aux morts: Patrimoine et mémoire de la grande guerre* (Paris, n.d.), found only one war memorial that included the figure of a nurse, in the chapel of Douaumont.

¹⁵ Donnay, *Lettres à une dame blanche*, 72–73.

war soon went out of print and today are difficult to find. When I tell French librarians and archivists that I am researching women in France during World War I, they frequently begin to talk about the Resistance. World War II produced legends of female heroism; World War I did not. Since the volunteer nurses of World War I had the best chance to create a story of women's war experience, the fact that no such story entered the culture is significant. By examining the way commentators conceived of nursing and the way that nurses themselves understood their wartime service, we can begin to understand why women's own contributions to the war failed to find a place in French memory.

This article analyzes wartime commentary on "French women and the war" written by propagandists, apologists, and critics, to understand French conceptions of the war nurse, her characteristics, role, and proper relationship to the war. It also investigates the personal accounts of French war nurses to see how they saw themselves, their work, and their relationship to France, to the soldiers, and to the war. In both bodies of literature, we find the true nurse—called *la vraie*—the angel of mercy and devoted surrogate mother to the *petit poilu*, whose feminine nature supports the masculine war effort, shadowed by the false nurse, suspected of putting her own, that is, feminine, interests ahead of the national, that is, masculine, ones. Instead of supporting the masculine war, the false nurse tried to hijack it, to undermine the virile national regeneration that was the justification of the war and its ultimate purpose. And even when the true nurse won out, as she usually does in nurses' personal accounts, relegating the false nurse to the category of the exception that proves the rule, she faced an even more potent rival for the Nation's attention, the object of her devotion, the wounded soldier. All agreed that volunteer nursing was personal, rather than abstract, national service, that while the soldier served France, the nurse served the soldier. Her patriotism was worked on his body, her commitment to the national cause was expressed in her devotion to him. Nurses' memoirs became eulogies to the suffering and martyrdom of French masculinity.

WITHIN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY Myth of [Masculine] War Experience, there was no place for women. Since war was to be a contest of masculinity, women would have no direct role—in fact, there should be no feminine war experience at all. The torrent of pre-war drum-beating literature almost never anticipated a role for women in the conflict some Frenchmen so ardently envisioned. For example, French nationalist Maurice Barrès, in the novel *L'appel au soldat*, depicted the relationship of women to the national war against Germany in one subordinate phrase: "The sinister cries of death fell poetically like dusk upon the little towns and tore the hearts of women, who swore, however, to be worthy of the heroes."¹⁶

Nonetheless, spurred by a series of crises in the decade before World War I—the war in Morocco in 1907–1908, the Agadir crisis in 1911, and the debate over the extension of military service in 1913—some who contemplated a war with Germany

¹⁶ Maurice Barrès, *L'appel au soldat* (Paris [1899]), 50. In other pro-war fiction, such as Art Roë, *Pingot et moi* (Paris, 1896); and Ernest Psichari, *L'appel des armes* (Paris, 1913), women impinge on the warrior-heroes only to signal their heterosexuality.

began to discuss what women's role in "tomorrow's war" might be. One voice in this discussion came from Parisian feminist circles. In response to opponents of women's suffrage who argued that women should not vote because they did not perform military service, Marguerite Durand, the suffragist leader and editor of the feminist daily *La fronde*, and Madeleine Pelletier, a militant socialist feminist, both called for the establishment of national service for women.¹⁷ A group of young women petitioned the Ministry of War with the same idea: "Our dearest hope is to be able to offer France a part of our youth and thus to cooperate with our brothers in the national defense," they wrote.¹⁸ Catholic social activism, stimulated by the campaign to canonize Joan of Arc, provided another perspective from which to examine the conundrum of women and war. In 1912, the Catholic organization L'Action Sociale de la Femme heard two lectures from François de Witt-Guizot entitled "Woman and War: How a Woman May Serve France in Wartime," which I quoted in introducing this article. In May of 1913, the 10th Congrès Jeanne D'Arc, held at the Institut Catholique in Paris, included a session on "Women and Patriotism."¹⁹ But the main proponent of wartime service for women was the French Red Cross. As its publicists never tired of pointing out, Germany had beaten France in 1870 not only by the force of masculine arms but also by the organization of feminine hands; Germany had fielded ten times the number of volunteer nurses as had France.²⁰ In the aftermath of that war, the first of the three French Red Cross organizations, the Society to Aid Military Wounded (Société de Secours aux Blessés Militaires) laid claim to a clear wartime mission. In the years before World War I, Red Cross recruiting and fund-raising campaigns, annual conferences, and publications kept the issue before the public.²¹

From this effort began to emerge a vision of women's war service. It was to be patriotic, it was to be national, and it was to call forth devotion and self-sacrifice equivalent to men's. But it was to be feminine: supportive and nonviolent. For the vast majority of commentators, nursing the wounded best fit the bill. This conclusion attests to the success of Red Cross publicity and lobbying. A law in 1910, revised in 1913, gave trained Red Cross volunteers a defined place under military authority within the military medical service.²² And the French government agreed

¹⁷ Léon Abensour, *Les vaillantes: Héroïnes, martyres et remplaçantes* (Paris, 1917), 31–35; Steven C. Hause with Anne R. Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 149; and Madeleine Pelletier, *La femme en lutte pour ses droits* (Paris, 1908), 41. I thank Steven C. Hause for finding the reference in Pelletier's writing.

¹⁸ Cited in Andrée d'Alix, *La croix-rouge française: Le rôle patriotique des femmes* (Paris, 1914), 5.

¹⁹ Witt-Guizot, *La femme et la guerre*; Georges Goyau, preface to Alix, *La croix-rouge française*, xiv–xv; "Les femmes au service du pays," *Lectures pour tous* (September 15, 1916): 1805.

²⁰ Witt-Guizot, *La femme et la guerre*, 22; Alix, *La croix-rouge française*, 37–38.

²¹ "Feminine Assistance in Wartime" was a favorite topic at Red Cross conferences; it was, for example, the title of the keynote speech by Dr. César Legrand in the 1906 conference and the topic addressed by Dr. Berthier at the 1910 conference. See César Legrand, *L'assistance féminine en temps de guerre* (Paris, 1907); and Véronique Leroux-Hugon, "Les dames blanches," in Yvonne Knibiehler, *et al.*, *Cornettes et blouses blanches: Les infirmières dans la société française (1880–1980)* (Paris, 1984), 82. Besides Alix's promotional history of the French Red Cross, 1914 also saw the publication of Louis Lespine, *Les hôpitaux de la croix-rouge française en temps de guerre: Comment les organiser et les faire classer* (Paris, 1914). And there were frequent articles about Red Cross doings in the Parisian press. See, for example, *Le monde illustré* (December 3, 1898); *Le petit parisien* (November 29, 1899); and *Le temps* (September 27 and October 1, 1907).

²² Leroux-Hugon, "Les dames blanches," 83–85.

to reinforce the staff of male nurses and orderlies who served in military hospitals with women, opening a national school of nursing at Salpêtrière in 1907 to train them.²³ The new role found popular confirmation in fiction. Late nineteenth-century French fiction abounded in social novels (*romans de mœurs*) that shocked and entertained readers with the risqué affairs of society ladies who, in the last few pages, usually either died in repentance or retired to convents in order to restore order to society. A novel by Georges Clément Lechartier in 1914 introduced a new and more adventurous moral ending. His heroine, after enjoying a couple of hundred pages of Parisian high life, has a moral conversion and—joins the Red Cross! With her husband, another reformed debauché, she volunteers for service in Morocco, and the book ends with the two reclaimed souls sailing off into the sunset, having dedicated their future lives to their sacred country—“Sacrifice, devotion to others, to the Fatherland, heroism.”²⁴

Previous to the Red Cross’s successful publicity campaigns, nursing was not popularly imagined as patriotic—it was not even considered especially feminine. The work of nursing was unpleasant, manual labor, most akin to that of a maid-of-all-work. Nurses scrubbed wards, emptied bed pans, boiled bandages, and carried coal, as well as washing and feeding patients and changing dressings. Both men and women performed this work. Nor did people think of nursing as benevolent service to the sick. Working-class men and women did it for pay—and very low pay at that—while nuns labored in self-mortifying service to God.²⁵

The new ethos of nursing, as articulated in Lechartier’s novel and in Red Cross propaganda, took over the nun’s vocation, turned it from God to *la patrie*, and characterized it as distinctly feminine. (See Figure 2.) First of all, Red Cross promoters cast volunteer nursing as a national service for women parallel to military service for men. M. Levasseur, writing about the Red Cross in 1899 in *Le petit parisien*, maintained, “When the whole nation rises up to defend the soil and patrimony of France, the two sexes have an equal duty with different functions: the men to combat and the women to the ambulance!”²⁶ Louis Lespine, in his 1914 instruction manual for Red Cross organizations, claimed that volunteer nurses “are

²³ Véronique Leroux-Hugon, “Emergence de la profession,” in Knibiehler, *et al.*, *Cornettes et blouses blanches*, 63–64. By the outbreak of the war in 1914, there were still only ninety-six of these career military nurses. Leroux-Hugon, “Les dames blanches,” 96–107.

²⁴ Georges-Clement Lechartier, *La confession d’une femme du monde* (Paris, 1914), 287.

²⁵ The dominance of nuns in hospitals was one of the main reasons that Minister of the Interior Emile Combes, a rabid anti-cleric, supported a national school for military nurses, to laicize and professionalize the nursing corps in order to redirect it toward more nationalist ends and more “scientific” methods. There was a contentious debate about the nature of nursing at the turn of the century with three models in competition, each involving class as well as different notions of femininity and work. One was the nurse as a servant, one of the “vaillantes filles du peuple” that municipal nursing courses hoped to attract to work for the embryonic welfare system. The second was the nurse as a “religieuse laïque” in devoted service to the (male) doctor and secular science. The third, promoted by Dr. Anna Hamilton, often called the French Florence Nightingale, was the nurse as a trained professional. Leroux-Hugon argues that professionalism was advancing until World War I, when it was overwhelmed by wartime “devotion,” a setback, she claims, from which nursing as a profession has yet to recover. Véronique Leroux-Hugon, “L’infirmière au début du XX^e siècle: Nouveau métier et tâches traditionnelles,” *Le mouvement social*, no. 140 (July–September 1987): 55–68; Leroux-Hugon, “Les dames blanches,” 83–208.

²⁶ *Le petit parisien* (November 29, 1899). Legrand, *L’assistance féminine*, 5, says virtually the same thing. And when, in 1908, deputy Louis Martin paralleled military service to motherhood in a speech to the Women’s Rights conference in Paris, a member of the audience spoke up to add, “In wartime,

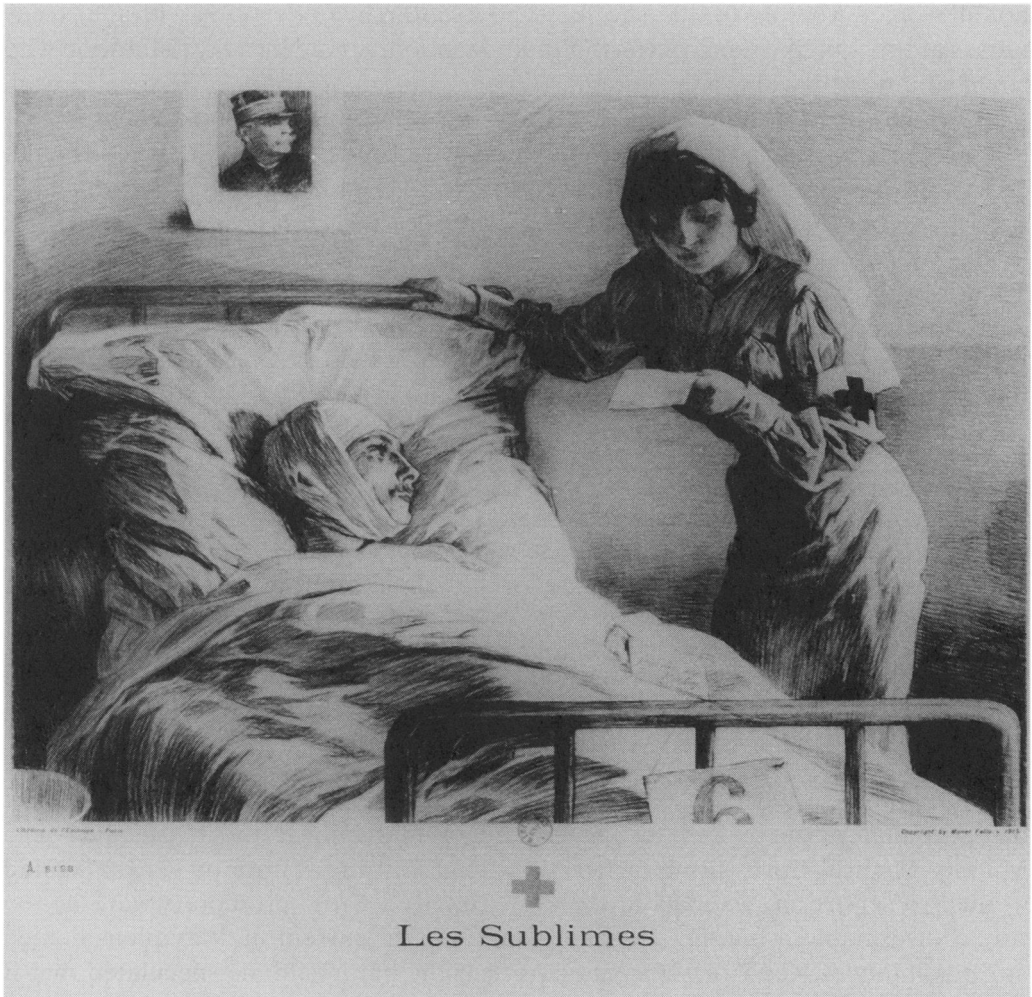


FIGURE 2: The French Red Cross nurse in popular imagination, virginal and devoted. Copyright Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

also a voluntary reserve of the national army.” Dr. César Legrand, another Red Cross activist, even raised the possibility of nurse heroines, women killed in battle.²⁷

Secondly, in the new ethos, nursing was to be a vocation, requiring the spirituality, self-abnegation, and perfect submission to authority of a nun. Inevitably, this was the main message of Catholic social activists such as Witt-Guizot,²⁸ but Red Cross publicists made use of this aspect as well. In her 1914 book, *La croix-rouge française: Le rôle patriotique des femmes*, Andrée d’Alix claimed that a Red Cross nurse—*une vraie*—required difficult training, not only in science and medical practice but especially in self-mastery and self-abnegation. Admitting that

women also nurse the wounded.” *Congrès national des droits civils et du suffrage des femmes, compte rendu*, published by Mme. Oddo Deflou (Paris, 1910), 193.

²⁷ Lespine, *Les hôpitaux*, v; Legrand, *L’assistance féminine*, 275–83.

²⁸ Witt-Guizot, *La femme et la guerre*, 31, 37.

not all women were up to this, she sketched a hierarchy of devotion with the “true” nurses at the top, like nuns, perfect in their devotion, served by a lay sisterhood who could volunteer to work in the laundry, kitchen, and supply room.²⁹ Georges Goyau, a spokesman for Catholic social activism who introduced the book, claimed that religious service was more than a metaphor for volunteer nursing: deprived by the expulsion of religious orders of the opportunity to dedicate themselves to God, French women had “invented a new set of duties for themselves” by dedicating themselves to nursing.³⁰

Thirdly, the Red Cross portrayed nursing as naturally feminine, the extension and embodiment of motherhood. For example, in its story on the Red Cross hospital at Auteuil, *Le monde illustré* claimed that nurses’ curative powers came as much from their female hearts as from their medical training.³¹ Dr. Legrand was the most eloquent on the subject; all aspects of nursing were, he argued, merely femininity refined:

The cult of the sick: this is her natural tenderness channeled toward a determined goal. The essence of medical cleanliness: this is her need for order and her art of embellishment put to work in the fight against the germ. A special cultivation, a little technical knowledge: this is her original curiosity profitably used. Calm, cool: this is the patience of a mother or a wife . . . Obedience: this is the single acknowledgement of her muscular inferiority, and, moreover, it is the law. Military courage, heroism: this is a mother’s devotion and incomparable self-abnegation brought to the task of helping the wounded. In truth, what a tiny distance a woman must go to change herself into a nurse!³²

If femininity so perfectly prepared women for wartime nursing, could it admit them to that preserve and testing ground of masculinity, the battlefield? The Military Medical Corps firmly believed it could not; the statute of 1913 relegated women to service in hospitals in the rear. But Red Cross promoters were not so sure. For example, while Dr. Legrand admitted that current military plans denied any possibility of Red Cross nurses on or near the battlefield, he speculated that if a war should prove lengthy, the rigid exclusion of women from front-line medical units might be difficult to maintain. He counseled Red Cross committees to fall in with the army’s current regulations but to be prepared—even to hold back funds—in anticipation of “a new mission.”³³

Nursing, promoted as women’s wartime service, was envisioned as feminine devotion nationalized, militarized, and even combat-ready but still held back from the masculine, military war experience. Georges Goyau articulated—and then denied—the contradiction embedded in this conception. For him, the Red Cross was an alternative army, fighting an alternative war.

Thus [the Red Cross nurses] direct the struggle against death: they are ready . . . for this kind of war in which women will be the combatants and will, from battlefield to battlefield, track the other war, the homicidal war. Thanks to these women, the rule of charity will be established . . . next to the rule of force: separating these two realms, between the plain

²⁹ Alix, *La croix-rouge française*, 46–50.

³⁰ Goyau preface to Alix, *La croix-rouge française*, xii.

³¹ *Le monde illustré* (December 3, 1898).

³² Legrand, *L’assistance féminine*, 284–85.

³³ Legrand, *L’assistance féminine*, 141–64, 197–98, 238–43.

where they kill each other and the oasis of human tenderness where the women labor, is hardly a fold of the landscape.³⁴

Hardly a fold of landscape but a universe of values! Goyau claimed that between the two “reigns a very close union,” but his vision creates the strong impression that they were hostile to one another. The nurses were fighting a war against the male war. If nurses were the war’s enemies, were they consequently enemies of its central value, the masculine nation? To ward off this conclusion, Goyau hastily added that the Red Cross was not anti-militaristic, claiming as proof that its leading members were the widows and daughters of officers.

So it was that France entered World War I with only one clear concept of women’s potential contribution to war, volunteer nursing, but that concept contradicted itself at its core. The question remained open: Could there be any relationship between the antithetical concepts of woman and war? Nursing, promoted as the means of reconciling the two, left their fundamental hostility intact.

DESPITE THE ENDURING CONTRADICTION, when France declared war on Germany, nursing was the main way that French women could imagine themselves participating. The deluge of requests to set up hospitals, organize ambulances, and nurse at home or on the battlefield caught the French government entirely off guard. Unprepared, suspicious, and at times frankly hostile to women’s desire to serve, the government requested women to stop volunteering.³⁵ Nonetheless, nursing war wounded remained conceptually and rhetorically (if not numerically) the quintessential feminine war service. As Léon Abensour wrote in 1917, “Whoever thinks of French women in 1914 sees a young nurse draped in a white or blue veil, very gay despite her monastic headdress displaying the blood-red cross. The Red Cross is, of all the immense activities of French women, the best known and the most popular, in truth we could say the only one known and the only popular one.”³⁶ Compared with the meager pre-war discussion of women’s role in war, wartime literature on this subject is voluminous. In virtually all of it, whether documentary, laudatory, or critical, nursing takes pride of place.³⁷ Nonetheless, wartime literature failed to resolve the contradictions of pre-war discourse. For most commentators, volunteer nursing was the ultimate feminine war service, yet whether it was *military* service, whether the nurse was truly engaged in the masculine war, remained in dispute. Catholic commentators tried to deal seriously, if a trifle nervously, with the precedent set by their recently beatified heroine, Joan of Arc; although Joan was called to fight, modern women were called to nurse, they maintained.³⁸ Feminists

³⁴ Goyau preface to Alix, *La croix-rouge française*, vi–vii.

³⁵ Leroux-Hugon, “Les dames blanches,” 84–87. *Le petit parisien* ran an “Appel aux Femmes” on August 6, 1914, requesting that women stop volunteering to be nurses. It suggested that there were more appropriate ways they could serve the war, such as replacing men in offices, sewing uniforms, or running child-care centers for the abandoned offspring of widowers in the military. But mainly, it requested women to stay home.

³⁶ Abensour, *Les vaillantes*, 85.

³⁷ The only exception is the small literature honoring women resisters and spies in occupied France. See, for example, Antoine Redier, *La guerre des femmes* (Paris, 1924).

³⁸ L’Abbé Stéphan Coubé, *La patriotisme de la femme française* (Paris, 1916), xii–xiii. Also see Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 8–10.

more bluntly equated masculine soldiering and feminine nursing. For example, Louise Zeys, a feminist journalist, called attention to the joint mobilization of soldiers and Red Cross volunteers: "During the night of the first of August, all the nurses on *active duty* received their mobilization orders . . . [T]hey joined the military trains that carried our troops toward the East, and in compartments reserved for nurses in *uniform* they were acclaimed by all as new comrades. Weren't they going to campaign together?"³⁹ Mobilized together, performing a common duty, nurses and soldiers would share the same risks, the same war: "They will share, in part, the life and dangers of the fighters," claimed Abensour, the leading contemporary chronicler of French feminism.⁴⁰

But such an easy assimilation of the feminine to the masculine military project disturbed, even revolted, many observers. An article in *La grande revue* in 1915 condemned nurses' pretensions to military service as silly and futile self-aggrandizement: "an army of beauty fanatically mobilizing to serve the army of force and dying for it."⁴¹ The author did not find this mobilization noble, she found it ridiculous. Military officials and satirists alike condemned women's apparent lust for uniforms of their own.⁴² Conservative columnist Lucien Descaves chastised nurses for "playing" at nursing when the men they were pretending to emulate certainly were not playing at soldiering. In particular, he condemned women's desire for recognition for their war service; if heroes can die in obscurity, he sanctimoniously intoned, then nurses should not seek publicity.⁴³

Much less controversial, although much more difficult to integrate into the masculine experience of war, was the depiction of the nurse as simultaneously mother and nun and definitely all woman, repeating and expanding the themes that had emerged before the war. Religious imagery, of course, arose easily from the history of nursing. Of the previous models, the poor working women and the nun, only the nun embodied any of the qualities that volunteer nursing wished to project. Red Cross uniforms copied nuns' habits with their coifes and impractical long veils in a conscious effort to appropriate to their wearers not only the qualities of nuns—selflessness, devotion, and asexuality—but also the respect and privileges society accorded them, for example, the ability to travel alone and to associate closely, even intimately, with men not of their immediate family, without jeopardizing their reputations or their caste. (See Figure 3.) Virtually all the eulogists of volunteer nursing stressed the nurse's vocation and her devotion, and some, such as Jack de Bussy in her novel *Refugiée et infirmière de guerre*, made the parallel with religious service explicit. The narrator states, "I am very highly impressed by the monastic aspect of all these women, the volunteer nurses who have broken with civilian life, that is to say, home, family, friends, habits, to consecrate themselves to

³⁹ Zeys, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 177, italics in original.

⁴⁰ Abensour, *Les vaillantes*, 88.

⁴¹ Aurel [Madame Alfred Mortier], "Moeurs de guerre," *La grande revue*, 19 (November 1915): 34.

⁴² Dr. Félix Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire à Paris pendant la guerre: Villemin, 1914–1919* (Paris, 1923), 145; José Roussel-Lépine, "Une ambulance de gare," *Revue des deux mondes* (June 1 and 15, 1916): 667; Corday, *Paris Front*, 12.

⁴³ Descaves, *La maison anxieuse*, 81–83; see similar remarks in Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 19–20. Roussel-Lépine, "Une ambulance de gare," and Geneviève Duhamet, *Ces dames de l'hôpital* 336 (Paris, 1917), both tell stories of Red Cross volunteers playing at setting up a hospital and being completely overwhelmed when a real war catches up with them.



DES DAMES DE LA CROIX-ROUGE PARTENT POUR LA BELGIQUE

L'admirable élan des volontaires français et étrangers qui demandent à s'enrôler sous les plis du drapeau tricolore n'a d'égal que le magnifique dévouement des femmes. Toutes demandent à se rendre utiles. Des mères, des épouses, des sœurs de combattants

partent elles aussi pour les champs de batailles prodiguer leurs soins, leurs encouragements, leurs consolations aux malheureux blessés. A Paris et dans la plupart des villes de province, des ambulances ont été organisées hâtivement, mais de façon parfaite.

FIGURE 3: "The Red Cross Ladies Depart for Belgium." *Le miroir* of August 10, 1914, celebrates the "magnificent devotion" of French womanhood. "Mothers, wives, and sisters of the fighters also leave for the battlefields to generously provide the wounded with care, encouragement, and consolation." Copyright Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

the War Wounded.”⁴⁴ But publicists emphasized not only the monastic costume, the renunciation of the world, and the devotion to a Cause but also the ideal of absolute self-abnegation and obedience. According to Georges Docquois’ introduction to Geneviève Duhamel’s novel, *Ces dames de l’hôpital* 336, the nurse was an anonymous acolyte in a secular religion in which the doctor stood in for Christ: “For their pure devotion, their wordless pity, they desire no other recompense than these five words from the doctor in charge: ‘I am satisfied with you.’”⁴⁵ In her book, Marcelle Cappy dispensed with the doctor/priest and depicted the nurse as a guardian angel, wrestling directly with the devil for the soul of her patient. “For these wounded creatures, the nurse must dispute with death . . . She is the savior, goodness in battle against the forces of darkness.”⁴⁶ The volunteer nurse-as-nun became so common an image that it soon attracted satirical treatment as well. José Roussel-Lépine, in his long, gently mocking article in the *Revue des deux mondes* on the creation of a Red Cross station, depicted nursing as an absurd religious ritual—“Dressings as sacred rite!”—rather than work or science.⁴⁷

The most popular image of all was the nurse as mother and the *petit poilu* as her infant. A song of the period, “Adieux à l’hôpital,” explained,

There we found rest
and to bandage our boobos [*bobos*]
women’s hands . . .
Goodbye to you, the good Mama
whose devotion is without limit.
Sweet nurse
now when everything is black
soften the despair
like a mother!⁴⁸

From nun to mother, the image of the volunteer nurse rested on essential womanhood. In wartime novels, it was not training that made a nurse, it was femininity. Charles Foley’s *Sylvette et son blessé*, for example, contrasted the failure of Madame Heltoux, a scientifically educated but unfemininely ambitious nurse, with the success of Sylvette, devoid of training but brimming with a tender heart, feminine devotion, and “grandmother’s recipes and old wives’ remedies.”⁴⁹ Even for Drs. Lejars and Mignon, who ran wartime military hospitals and demanded thoroughly professional staffs, a nurse’s womanly qualities were as important as her technical training. It was women’s voices, their way of moving, bending over, or sitting at the bedside, and “the infinitely consoling balm of womanly hearts” that

⁴⁴ Jack de Bussy, *Refugiée et infirmière de guerre* (Paris, 1915), 154. Also see Paul Duplessis de Pouzilhac, *Les mouettes aux croix-rouges: Contes médicaux de guerre* (Paris, 1917); and Abensour, *Les vaillantes*.

⁴⁵ Docquois preface to Duhamel, *Ces dames de l’hôpital*, 7. The preface states that Duhamel, a prolific novelist, was also a Red Cross nurse.

⁴⁶ Marcelle Cappy, *Une voix de femme dans la mêlée* (Paris, 1917), 135.

⁴⁷ Roussel-Lépine, “Une ambulance de gare,” 673–74.

⁴⁸ Leon Schneider, *Au bruit du canon: Poésies et souvenirs de guerre* (Paris, n.d.).

⁴⁹ Charles Foley, *Sylvette et son blessé* (Paris, 1917), 46. Roussel-Lépine, “Une ambulance de gare,” 682, also contrasted the “certified, oh! so certified volunteer, so self-sufficient, so worthy” with the true nurse “good, simple, and true. Your sister rather than your master, with all a real woman’s sweetness, intelligence, spirit, and devotion.”

reassured the wounded in ways male attendants could not.⁵⁰ For others, as “Adieux à l’hôpital” intoned, it was women’s hands.⁵¹ But the most exalted cure-all was a woman’s smile. “The smile of the French nurse has served the national defense well,” according to Republican politician Louis Barthou.⁵² This was the image of nursing that captured the public imagination—and the female imagination in particular. And Jules Combarieu noted in his wartime study of girls’ education:

To be a nurse! To have a right to this title of humility that the most beautiful ideas have made a title of nobility! To wear—with coquetry, of course, like the brave, young officers wear theirs—this blue and white uniform to which its insignia of devotion add the mysticism of a religious robe and which constitutes, in time of war, the supreme elegance of womanhood! Since the beginning of the war, this was the dream of many young girls.⁵³

The hands, the smile, the heart, the womanly elegance—they were to achieve a larger victory than to ease the pain of a few wounded soldiers; they were to heal France! Many writers claimed that the masculine camaraderie of the trenches was solving “The Social Question”; several eulogists of the Red Cross made similar claims for volunteer nursing. The Red Cross promoted its volunteers not only as feminine but as “ladylike.” Their unpaid status, which to Red Cross publicists guaranteed their selfless devotion to the Nation, did, in fact, guarantee self-selection by social class; few working-class or even middle-class women could afford to pay their own way. Socialist pacifist Marcelle Capy criticized the Red Cross for shutting out the vocation and nursing talent of less well-to-do women,⁵⁴ but for many commentators, the Red Cross’s elitism promoted national reconciliation. Devoid of the independence, sexuality, and material self-interest that coarsened the femininity of lower-class women, Red Cross nurses exuded a “moral force,” according to Dr. Lejars.⁵⁵ Through the experience of nursing the poor (but heroic) peasants and workers, elite young French women would learn to esteem “the popular soul,” while their patients would learn the error of their revolutionary doctrines.

Later, after the war, when life returns to normal, there is bound to be a reciprocal and more penetrating understanding between [the nurse] and the men of the people . . . Because of her, yesterday’s wounded, who is tomorrow’s electorate, will, after the war, mistrust revolutionary doctrines and be saner and clearer thinking. The Red Cross, healer of the body, will have contributed to making a new soul in generations of Frenchmen.⁵⁶

It will not escape the reader that it was the lower class that was supposed to modify its politics and that future electors were envisioned as male; this was a vision of

⁵⁰ Dr. Alfred Mignon, *Service de santé pendant la guerre 1914–1918*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1926–27), 4: 207–08, 299. Also see Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 143–48.

⁵¹ Also see M. Eydoux-Demians, *Notes d’une infirmière 1914* (Paris, 1915), 19, “the softness of feminine hands.” Repeated by historian Gabriel Perreux, *La vie quotidienne*, 445, who claims that volunteer nurses did miracles “effortlessly” with their “delicate and skillful fingers.”

⁵² Louis Barthou, *L’effort de la femme française* (Paris, 1917), 17. Perreux, *La vie quotidienne*, 44, also repeats this cliché.

⁵³ Combarieu, *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre*, 136.

⁵⁴ Capy, *Une voix de femme*, 81–82.

⁵⁵ Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 161–63.

⁵⁶ Courson, *La femme française*, 41–42. Also see René d’Ulmes, *Auprès des blessés* (Paris, 1916), 29–30, for a similar claim.

national reconciliation based on an acceptance of the status quo in terms of both class and gender subordination. The nurse, far from being an adventurous or emancipating figure, was presented as powerfully conservative.

But although devotion and motherhood were values beyond criticism, some aspects of femininity as embodied in volunteer nursing drew attacks. If, to Red Cross supporters, femininity translated into self-sacrifice and conservation of the social order, to Red Cross critics femininity spelled frivolity, fashion, sexuality, romantic adventure, and gender chaos. The Red Cross, critics claimed, licensed women to pursue selfish desires, obviously at odds with France's wartime interests, under a hypocrite's veil of patriotic devotion.

The nun, secularized and trained, was the model of the "true" nurse; her opposite, the society lady, was the favorite example of the rival image, the false nurse. Pre-war novels about "emancipated women" had already identified educated women and career women with fashionable circles; all had abandoned their natural feminine devotion to home and family for lives of pure selfishness.⁵⁷ Translated to the wartime scene, the society lady embraced, rather than abandoned, the world, the flesh, and the devil and volunteered to nurse, not to serve the Nation but to serve her own ambitions, to increase her social capital and political clout, to fill her empty hours, and to pursue sexual pleasure.⁵⁸ While the true nurse inhabited a cell, with the nursing manual at her bedside like a breviary,⁵⁹ the "fashion-plate nurse" arrived in a limousine, dripping with jewelry and self-importance. "With sounding horn and sparkling brass, the limousine advances ceremonially down the teeming street. Inside, bosom high, all in white, pearls at her ears, a Red Cross nurse . . . Grave gentlemen gallantly salute the *grande dame* who is playing angel."⁶⁰ But commentary and fiction, both during and after the war, evoked plots of conversion made conventional by the pre-war pseudo-moralistic social novels and anti-feminist novels; again and again, the act of nursing war victims converted society ladies to true femininity. After depicting the frivolous behavior of ladies who volunteered to nurse at his hospital, Dr. Lejars concluded, "A few among them understood; they renounced their habits and their worldly illusions, and made themselves humble and silent."⁶¹

The image of the society lady as nurse informed almost all of the critics of Red Cross nurses, from socialist pacifists like Marcelle Capy, quoted above, to Catholic moralists and nationalists. A typical claim was that women volunteered only in order to be able to wear the Red Cross uniform, which had quickly become a

⁵⁷ Maugue, *L'identité masculine en crise*, 54–64.

⁵⁸ The characterization of the false nurse as worldly permeates the criticism. See, for example, Capy, *Une voix de femme*, 81; Narquet, "La française de demain," 599; and Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 145.

⁵⁹ Roussel-Lépine, "Une ambulance de gare," 669.

⁶⁰ Capy, *Une voix de femme*, 84–85. Also see Paul d'Ivoi [Paul Deleutre], *Femmes et gosses héroïques* (Paris, 1915), 2–4. Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 145, complained that in August 1914 you could see Red Cross uniforms everywhere, "in the streets and even at five o'clock in automobiles on the Avenue du Blois."

⁶¹ Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 145. Many novels used this plot, for example: de Bussy, *Refugiée*; Pierre de Valrose, *Une âme d'amante pendant la guerre 1914* (Paris, 1916); Michel Provins, *Ceux d'hier, ceux d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1916). See Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago, 1994), 141–42, for a discussion of a postwar novel by Henry Bordeaux, *Ménages d'après guerre* (1921), employing the same device. Victor Margueritte's infamous novel, *La garçonnette* (1922), also drew upon it.

fashionable sign of social prestige. French women, especially Parisian women, moralists lamented, would go to any length in order to be in fashion. Foley describes his villain, the false nurse Madame Heltoux, as “the characteristic type of Parsienne before the war,” whose aim is to be fashionable at all costs.⁶² For such women, war service was just another aspect of their social lives, “a sport, a new game, a more enthralling variation of flirtation and the tango.”⁶³ What mattered to them was to be admitted to a “chic” hospital run by other society ladies; the new social delineator, smirked anti-feminist humorist Marcel Boulenger, was the answer to the question, “In which hospital does she work?”⁶⁴ Rather than promoting a social *union sacrée*, volunteer nursing had created a new arena of social competition. According to conservative columnist Lucien Descaves, Red Cross volunteers “cared for the poor wounded as if they were their brothers, it is true; but they only have brothers, no sisters.”⁶⁵

More serious charges followed. If the ideal volunteer was trained as a nurse and obedient as a nun, fashionable women who rushed to volunteer (“les élégantes de la première heure”) were both ignorant and independent. Used to getting their own way, they refused to subordinate themselves to a doctor’s authority. For Dr. Lejars, the perfect nurse was silent and anonymous—and society ladies were neither.⁶⁶ Their conception of nursing was to give out smiles and treats to handsome young officers—no dirty, coarse, or painful duties. Docquois imagined the reactions of one such: “And then, and then, when I heard that we’re only going to get common soldiers, well, my dear, really! It’s no longer the least bit interesting . . . What! Having had all these lovely coifes made to turn the head of some vulgar, penniless, foot-soldier?”⁶⁷ But the portrait is even more damning; Docquois suggested that this woman quit her hospital to flee the threatened invasion. And he was not alone in branding the nurse–society lady a coward; nurses’ uniforms, we learn from several commentators, were especially popular in Bordeaux during the fall of 1914, linking nurses with the “cowardly” behavior of the government that had abandoned Paris to take refuge there. One critic went further, claiming a disproportionate number of nurses in the southern resort town of Biarritz!⁶⁸ Although none of the serious commentators accused “false” nurses of treason, such stories appeared so

⁶² Foley, *Sylvette*, 7.

⁶³ Abensour, *Les vaillantes*, 92. Also see Narquet, “La française de demain,” 566.

⁶⁴ Boulenger, *Charlotte*, 124–25. Baronne Jane Michaux recalled, “At this moment [December 1914], all of society congregates in the hospitals. Naturally, there are chic hospitals and ones that aren’t so chic. Nothing can equal Madame Nobody’s job when she is allowed to enter Lady Big Shot’s ward, unless it is John Doe’s delight, invalidated out of the army and now permitted to fold sheets with a countess!” Michaux, *En marge du drame: Journal d’une parisienne pendant la guerre, 1914–1915* (Paris, 1916), 135.

⁶⁵ Descaves, *La maison anxieuse*, 80–81.

⁶⁶ Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 145. Lejars insisted repeatedly that nurses must be silent and anonymous, and he carried out this injunction in his own work. His chapter on hospital personnel named all the male staff—colleagues, medical assistants, pharmacists, even orderlies—but not a single nurse. In the whole book, he named only one nurse, in an aside in the chapter on paperwork. Mignon, *Service de santé*, 1: 39–40, also insisted on self-effacement and deplored independence, but he did not carry this opinion so far as to refuse to celebrate his nurses’ achievements. On pp. 300–01, he recorded the citations of heroic nurses in his sector.

⁶⁷ Docquois, preface to Duhamel, *Ces dames de l’hôpital*, 10.

⁶⁸ Corday, *Paris Front*, 12; Michaux, *En marge du drame*, 47; Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 102; Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 13.

frequently in newspapers and novels early in the war that British General Walter Kirk suspected all “secretive females with fancy Red Cross outfits” in the war zone of being “an obvious means of access for hostile agents.”⁶⁹

The key failing of the society lady as a nurse, however, was her sexuality.⁷⁰ When represented as a nun or a mother, the nurse was asexual—and so was her patient; the soldier became a soul to be saved or a child to be nurtured. The fashionable woman, by contrast, brought sexuality with her; her patients were, first and foremost, men. Thus she exploded the neat gender sequestration that the war rhetoric had ordained, that masculinity was locked in solitary combat on the battlefield while femininity waited in abeyance at home.

Almost all the contemporary light fiction that dealt with wartime nursing featured, as the main plot device, the romantic connection between a volunteer nurse and her soldier (usually an officer) patient. Sometimes, it is the nurse’s maternal care that shelters romance, as in Foley’s *Sylvette*; sometimes, more shocking, it is the nurse’s nun-like posture. In Maxime Formont’s novel *La dame blanche*, the wounded soldiers follow the heroine with their eyes. “When they saw her pass by, in her immaculate robe of a seraphim, she gave the impression of a young girl by the transparency of her face, the freshness of her eyes. But her charm was that of a woman.”⁷¹ Who and what was she, they speculated: a *mondaine*? a *femme libre*? an actress? And they were, of course, right; her virgin’s veil did indeed cover a dark past of sexual experience. This was the plot convention already laid down in Lechartier’s pre-war novel—volunteer nursing as redemption for fallen women—but here it expanded to imbue nursing itself with erotic implications. All the popular genres in which nursing figured during the war, whether social novels, novels of moral uplift, satiric sketches, comedy, even the soldiers’ trench newspapers, portrayed nursing as essentially a means of intimate contact between upper-class young women and strange men, and all such contact was represented as romantic.⁷² It was a romantic connection with a purpose; in these stories, love of country came a distant second to love of a good man. A girl’s true aim in volunteering to nurse war wounded was not to serve her country, it was to further her own feminine interests. Such was the equivocal result of conceptualizing women’s war service as personal devotion; in these stories, instead of seeing the Nation in the body of her wounded patient, the nurse was seeing the man.

⁶⁹ Cited in Julie Wheelwright, *The Fatal Lover: Mata Hari and the Myth of Women in Espionage* (London, 1992), 125. See *Le petit parisien* (October 15 and December 11, 1914) for stories about “false” nurses; and Pierre Decourcelle, *Les marchands de patrie*, a serial novel published in *Le journal* in 1916, for a typical nursing espionage story. One French prefect was sufficiently influenced by this suspicion to worry about security at hospitals: “There are too many women in the hospitals and ambulances,” he complained. Archives Nationales, F⁷ 12939, Haute-Vienne.

⁷⁰ Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 1: 79–100, identifies in postwar German *Freikorps* novels the contrast of the true “White Nurse,” maternal, protective, and conservative, with the false “Red Nurse,” who is a working-class whore. Red Cross propaganda had ensured that no “Red Nurses” appeared in French wartime writing, but the society lady as nurse admitted some of the sexuality of the “Red Nurse” that had been erased from the “White Nurse” in both cultures.

⁷¹ Maxime Formont, *La dame blanche* (Paris, 1917), 15–16.

⁷² See Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914–1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, Helen McPhail, trans. (Providence, R.I., 1992), 131. And it is not only contemporary fiction that viewed the relationship between nurses and war wounded in this way; this view has been repeated by historians such as Perreux, *La vie quotidienne*, 53–54, who described romance between nurse and patient as the rule rather than the exception.

This view was not confined to the pages of fiction; critics accused women of volunteering to nurse either from a frivolous addiction to flirtation, deprived by the absence of young men in wartime society, or from the single-minded pursuit of matrimony.⁷³ The renowned psychologist Dr. Toulouse linked the rush of young women to volunteer to the great losses of young men in the first months of the war. But he did not believe that the causal connection was women's patriotism; instead, it was women's recognition that their chances on the marriage market were being suddenly reduced. "The husband hunt has become a big deal for the young woman and remarkably assists her duty to aid the wounded," he cynically remarked.⁷⁴

Behind these criticisms lurked the fear that nursing spelled the end of sexual innocence for young women. In turn-of-the-century novels and moralistic tracts, the scene of the young woman clandestinely reading a medical book had come to represent the corruption of feminine innocence by modern life.⁷⁵ Now, the literary trope had become reality. As Dr. Toulouse sermonized, "The war came, and the most sheltered young woman enrolled in the nursing corps. The mystery of the other sex, which had been strictly kept from her, was brusquely revealed in the beds of pain of wounded soldiers . . . The young woman now knows. She is warned, she no longer lowers her eyes like before, and she sees clearly ahead of her, in the world and in life."⁷⁶ Toulouse did not entirely condemn this eventuality, even though he regretted it. But, for others, French soldiers' demonstrations of manliness in the trenches would come to nothing if wartime female emancipation cast France back into the pit of gender chaos. What was the point of the war at all if women's war experience undermined men's? Formont drove the point home in his novel *La dame blanche*: nursing was not supposed to emancipate women, it was supposed to make evident and acceptable their necessary subordination to men. As a result of her nursing, the heroine rejected her pre-war feminism: "'Now,' she went on, 'man is our champion, our hero, even our god. A poor god who dies for us, to save us from the Beast's fury! Woman realizes what she owes him.'"⁷⁷ But the specter of nursing as an open road to sexual emancipation, cultivated in this novel, as in so many others, was too strong to be dissipated by such a transparent ritual of conversion.⁷⁸

Critical evaluations of nurses were not confined to a few misogynists and conservatives; they pervaded the wartime literature that explored women's relationship to the war. Commentator after commentator, republicans, socialists, and

⁷³ Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 19–20; Berthem-Bontoux, *Les françaises et la grande guerre*, 148; Combarieu, *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre*, 139; and an editorial in the feminist periodical, *La voix des femmes*, no. 8 (December 19, 1917), by Louise Bodin, "Voyons, mesdames . . ."

⁷⁴ Dr. Toulouse, *La réforme sociale: Question sexuelle de la femme* (Paris, 1918), 71–72.

⁷⁵ Mireille Dottin-Orsini, *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale: Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle* (Paris, 1993), 246.

⁷⁶ Toulouse, *La réforme sociale*, 12. In postwar fiction, wartime nursing served the same plot purposes as stolen glances into medical texts in pre-war fiction. See Mauge, *L'identité masculine en crise*, 177. Not all commentators saw this revelation as inevitable, however. Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*, 24, suggested ways to fight against it. If unmarried women were allowed to volunteer at all, they must be confined to dressing "the finger, just the hand, and perhaps the arm."

⁷⁷ Formont, *La dame blanche*, 25.

⁷⁸ In most wartime writing, these fears floated below the surface, but after the war they emerged in a wave of misogyny, such as the vicious pamphlet by Lt. Georges Grandjean, *De la dépravation . . . des femmes . . . des décadences!* (Paris, 1919), which called upon men, having won the battle against the Boche, now to win the battle of the sexes at home and put women back in their place. See Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*.

feminists, as well as clerics and conservatives, in chapters usually titled "White Angels," followed their eulogies to nurses' devotion and feminine healing powers with doses of criticism. Some commentaries quickly dismissed "abuses" as insignificant,⁷⁹ but in others, the depiction of the "false nurse"—ambitious, frivolous, wanton—claimed as much or more space than that of *la vraie*.⁸⁰ Without doubt, the volunteer nurse, although held up as the best symbol of feminine support for the war, was a disturbing figure.

THOSE WHO EXPERIENCED World War I found it notoriously difficult to write about. Europeans by 1914 were heirs to a coherent set of concepts, images, and a glamorous rhetoric that purported to convey the true meaning of war, full of honor, courage, heroism, self-sacrifice, and manliness.⁸¹ During World War I, official rhetoric in France perpetuated this view, in which, for example, soldiers always "fell on the field of honor." Although Paul Fussell argues that the "eye wash" churned out by the press repulsed British trench fighters,⁸² Annick Cochet's study of French soldiers' letters and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's study of trench newspapers find that in their own writings soldiers sustained some of the same myths.⁸³ Especially early in the war, there was no other vocabulary available. Gradually, realist, pessimist, and even absurdist and pacifist modes began to challenge the traditional heroic rhetoric, beginning with Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* (1916). In the 1930s, a new wave of war literature appeared that deepened the bitter, ironic current, for example, Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and Jean Renoir's film, *La grande illusion* (1937).⁸⁴ Although these works have entered the canon, at the time they represented a small ripple in a tidal wave of the Myth of War Experience from which, George Mosse argues, not even such pacifist novels as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* were exempt.⁸⁵

Women's wartime experience was even more constrained by myth than men's.

⁷⁹ For example, Combarieu, *Les jeunes filles françaises et la guerre*; and Courson, *La femme française*.

⁸⁰ For example, Masson, *Les femmes et la guerre*; Abensour, *Les vaillantes*; Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*; Berthem-Bontoux, *Les françaises et la grande guerre*; Duplessis de Pouzilhac, *Les mouettes aux croix-rouges*. This is also true of the novels, which often pitted good nurses against bad, as in Foley, *Sylvette*; de Bussy, *Refugiée*; and Duhamel, *Ces dames de l'hôpital*.

⁸¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975); John Cruickshank, *Variations on Catastrophe: Some French Responses to the Great War* (Oxford, 1982); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990); Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.

⁸² Fussell, *Great War*, 86–88. Nosheen Khan, *Women's Poetry of the First World War* (Lexington, Ky., 1988), 6, demonstrates that the British trench-fighter poets also coded this "high diction" as feminine even though its main practitioners before the war—Rudyard Kipling, Sir Henry Newbolt, W. E. Henley, Maurice Barrès—had been men. The trench-fighter poets seem to have taken particular umbrage when women adopted this rhetoric—witness Robert Graves's diatribe about the "Little Mother" letter in *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Khan also claims, p. 19, that Wilfred Owen wrote "Dulce et Decorum Est" as a response to a popular poem by Jessie Pope.

⁸³ Annick Cochet, *L'opinion et le moral des soldats en 1916 d'après les archives du contrôle postal*, 2 vols. (Thèse pour le doctorat, Paris X–Nanterre, 1986). Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, 82–84, indicates that trench newspapers honored the "cult of the dead" among trench fighters and, 168–73, that although defending German courage, they also reproduced the stereotypes of German cruelty.

⁸⁴ Mary Jean Green, "1914–1918: La grande guerre," in Denis Hollier, ed., *De la littérature française* (Paris, 1993), 795–801.

⁸⁵ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 198–99. Also see Rose Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War, 1919–1939* (Providence, R.I., 1993).

Men, writing from their authenticating experience as soldiers, could place themselves within the rhetoric of heroism, or on its margins, the better to engage it in a kind of guerrilla war, exploding its concepts to reveal the grim and absurd realities beneath. But, one way or the other, they conceived of war as an appropriate male domain; the writers did not have to explain or justify men's relationship to the war—war was a given of masculinity. And their memoirs helped to commemorate World War I as exclusively and obsessively masculine.⁸⁶

By contrast, commentators on women's wartime experience, whether critics, apologists, or memoirists, had to explain and justify women's excursion into war literature and into the experience of war that it claimed to represent. Léonie Godfroy, a Red Cross volunteer nurse who was captured when Noyon fell to the German army, tried to explain in the introduction to her brief memoirs how it was she was writing a war memoir and why it differed so much from other such literature.

But when, giving in to the affectionate curiosity of my friends, I decided to write up part of my memories, I realized that the tableaux I was going to evoke differed in fundamental ways from most of those you see in the newspapers every day. This is caused by a difference in point of view . . . War appears to be something abominable or something sublime, depending upon the side one experiences. I must declare that I saw only the somber side. This is women's share. Those of us whom chance or vocation draw into the vast drama must resign ourselves to seeing only the saddest of realities. To men, in the first rank of danger, go the superb spirits, the epic spectacles of the battlefield. To us, the other side of the picture . . . We don't meddle with the heroes in the apotheosis of combat. They come to us *afterwards*, bloody, exhausted, mute. It's not surprising that our memoirs often seem like nightmares, while there is joy in theirs—a sort of superhuman joy.⁸⁷

Before the war, Georges Goyau had depicted nursing as a women's war, fought "a fold of the landscape" away from the masculine battlefield. Similarly, Godfroy constructed a masculine and a feminine war, operating next to each other, not in space, like Goyau's alternative army, but in time; for Godfroy, the woman's war is the war that happens after the masculine war. And like Goyau, Godfroy and her editor feared that the feminine war would be interpreted as an anti-war.

The simplest way, however, for women to stake a claim on a war experience was not to define a rival feminine war but to embrace the masculine war myth of self-sacrifice for one's country and to claim it for women. The volunteer nurse was well positioned to make this claim, but it excluded her from the critic's position on the margin. Even a pacifist such as the English writer Vera Brittain was unable, in

⁸⁶ This is strikingly obvious in the voluminous literary criticism of World War I writings, which, until the very recent studies by Khan, *Women's Poetry*; Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914–64* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1990); and Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War* (London, 1994), excluded women's writing by definition from war literature. See, for example, Maurice Rieuneau, *Guerre et révolution dans le roman français de 1919 à 1939* (Paris, 1974), a critical study that follows the bibliography established by Jean-Norton Cru, who explicitly excluded all writings by non-combatants and thus any by women. As Hynes, *War Imagined*, 158–59, points out, combatants alone were presumed to know the truth of the war.

⁸⁷ Léonie Godfroy, *Souvenirs d'ambulance et de captivité (Noyon à Holzminden)* (Paris [1917]), 5. Emphasis in original.

her memoir, to escape the rhetoric of military heroism, and none of her French counterparts was able to sustain even Brittain's degree of critical analysis.⁸⁸ An incident, an episode might elicit a critical response, but this could not encompass the whole experience. To reject the mythic war instantly removed the female author from war's universe and left her no ground from which to launch her reevaluation. To be in the war at all, women had to accept, at least partially, the heroic myth. As a result, it is not surprising that the memoirs of wartime nurses are unconvincing either as literature or as historical records. Few memoirs resolved the tension between the rhetoric of noble suffering and heroic sacrifice and the reality of dirt, pain, fear, and fatigue, with most memoirs swinging from one mode to the other without any attempt at reconciliation. For example, Noëlle Roger began her description of a ward of seriously wounded soldiers with the claim that "each of these men had lived a glorious adventure." She then depicted the shrieking pain of a man brought from the operating table, the rigid terror of a tetanus victim, and the hallucinations of a shell-shock case. However, her intent was not irony; she did not seem to notice—or could not express—that none of these were glorious adventures.⁸⁹

The memoirs of French women who volunteered to nurse during World War I are a mixed genre, including obvious propaganda literature written in the obligatory "high diction" of chivalry as well as more realistic documentation of women's war experience. Propaganda memoirs, such as Hélène Leune's *Tel qu'ils sont: Notes d'une infirmière de la Croix Rouge* (1915), predominated in the early years of the war.⁹⁰ By 1916, the cast of "little heroes" and "white angels" that people the earlier memoirs began to give way to more realistic descriptions of nursing routine. Rather than the relationship of one ideal nurse to "her" wounded, these memoirs usually depicted the institutional shape of nursing. Sometimes, as in Madame Emmanuel Colombel's *Journal d'une infirmière d'Arras: Août-septembre-octobre 1914* (1916) and M. de La Boulaye's *Croix et cocarde* (1919), the life of the hospital or ambulance itself became the subject of the memoir.⁹¹

Not surprisingly, the accounts that broke most consistently with the high diction of the War Myth were published after the war was over. Clemenceau's daughter, Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire, wrote the most hard-hitting of French nursing accounts, *Les hommes de bonne volonté* (1919). It intersperses accounts of soldiers' suffering with vivid depictions of the back-breaking, soul-destroying work

⁸⁸ See Tylee, *Great War and Women's Consciousness*, 47–74; and Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*, 35. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (1933).

⁸⁹ Noëlle Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière* (Paris, 1915), 1: 22–29. Roger, a pseudonym for Mme. Hélène Pittard, was a prolific novelist. It is not clear if this work is indeed the diary of an anonymous nurse, as she claims, or the product of her own observation and imagination.

⁹⁰ Hélène Leune, *Tel qu'ils sont: Notes d'une infirmière de la croix rouge* (Paris, 1915); and a similar piece, Eydoux-Demians, *Notes d'une infirmière* (1915), appear to be pseudo-memoirs. They recount, as if personally experienced, standard atrocity and nobility stories that show up in other propaganda of the period. Also in this genre are Berthem-Bontoux, *Les françaises et la grande guerre* (1917); and Yvonne Pitrois, *Les femmes de 1914–1915*, Vol. 2: *Les infirmières héroïques* (Geneva [1915]). Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière* (1915); and d'Ulmes, *Auprès des blessés* (1916), recount uplifting stories of soldiers' heroic sacrifice in which nurses play witness to noble suffering and patriotic last words.

⁹¹ Mme. Emmanuel Colombel, *Journal d'une infirmière d'Arras: Août-septembre-octobre 1914* (Paris, 1916); M. de La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde* (Paris, 1919). Others include Jeanne Antelme, *Avec l'armée d'orient: Notes d'une infirmière à Moudros* (Paris, 1916); and Julie Crémieux, *Croquis d'heures vécues, 1914–1919* (Fourmies, 1934).

of nursing at the front, for, as Dr. Legrand had predicted, the Military Medical Corps was soon forced to admit women to its war-zone facilities. As the title suggests, Jacquemaire wrote this fictionalized memoir to eulogize the honor, courage, and sacrifice of the French Common Man, but in place of the standard "high diction" is an unrelentingly downbeat tone: these men often suffer unnecessarily. Like the trench-fighter memoirists, Jacquemaire depicted a combat in which the main enemy was not the Germans but the living and working conditions of the war, the bureaucratic procedures of the army, and even her own supervisors. And, like Barbusse's famous novel published three years earlier, Jacquemaire's questioned the validity of war and her role in it. In a monologue by her alter-ego, nurse Madame Berton, Jacquemaire imagined the nurse's role as the attendant at the corrida who patches up the wounded horses and whips them back to their feet, once more to face the bull's horns. Yet, in the end, Jacquemaire backed away from Barbusse's concluding call to pacifism: Must we do this? she asked, and replied immediately, "Yes, for it is the price of victory."⁹²

Despite the differences in experience and in discourse, most nursing accounts shared many themes with each other and with the commentary on nurses' war service. Nursing as the feminine equivalent of military service and the nurse as nun or mother were images that the nurses themselves found persuasive. The main differences between their views and those of the commentators were in emphasis. None broke out entirely from the dominant discourse.

Most of the accounts presented volunteer nursing as similar to, or even the equivalent of, men's military service. For example, La Boulaye claimed veteran status for herself and her fellow nurses. After a particularly harrowing operation, she wrote, "French women soon will have two years of campaigning: we are no longer cadets [*des bleues*]." Actress Lola Noyr explained why she left her career to volunteer as a nurse: "I always wanted to go to the front; I considered myself a soldier and I believed I shouldn't stay behind; I would have thought myself a shirker."⁹³

The nurses almost invariably used a rhetoric of service, sacrifice, and devotion to describe their own motivations in volunteering and to depict the "true" nurse. Sometimes, the ideal nurse was literally a nun;⁹⁴ for others, she was merely nun-like. "Suddenly, personality fades under the uniform. You only feel an immense desire to do good, the absolute consent of your whole self to discipline. You become that anonymous being who obeys the sound of a bell, the doctor's gesture, the patient's call, who stands respectfully at the head of the bed and who takes on every chore, even the most repulsive: these humble chores, how sweet they now seem to me!"⁹⁵

⁹² Madeleine Clemenceau Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté* (Paris, 1919), 265–66. This section, entitled "Les rentrants," was published first in *L'illustration* (March 29, 1919). Two American nursing memoirs, Elle La Motte, *Backwash of War*, published in 1916 and withdrawn in 1918 due to its anti-war message, and Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (1929), refused to pull the punches of their pacifist convictions (Tylee, *Great War and Women's Consciousness*, 93–102), but Jacquemaire's is the only French nursing memoir to confront the question of whether women should be patching up men to send them back to be killed.

⁹³ La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, 223; Lola Noyr in Camille Clermont, ed., *Souvenirs de parisiennes en temps de guerre* (Paris, 1918), 203. Also see Crémieux, *Croquis d'heures vécues*, 39.

⁹⁴ Eydoux-Demians, *Notes d'une infirmière*, depicts Sister Gabrielle as the perfect nurse; for La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, it is Sister Rosalie.

⁹⁵ Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière*, 2: 11.

Maternal imagery was less pervasive, appearing mostly in the accounts from nurses in convalescent hospitals. In these stories, the wounded were always *petits* and the nurse's job was to wait on them, scold them, and "spoil" them with treats and attention.⁹⁶ Perhaps maternal rhetoric rang less true for some volunteers because they experienced conflict, rather than continuity, between hospital and family roles. While commentators condemned nurses who "deserted" their posts, the nurses themselves discovered that the job of "mothering" wounded soldiers did not exempt them from their own family obligations. Madame Colombel recalled dutifully visiting her husband at his request, although it required her to leave her hospital post in Arras at the height of the German advance in September 1914. And just as dutifully, Juliette Martineau cut short her visit to her family despite her mother's protests to return to her hospital when it was suddenly inundated with wounded.⁹⁷ In neither case did the woman have a clear moral imperative to guide her choice. The analogy of nurse to mother did nothing to clarify the situation.

Although motherhood was attenuated as a motif in nurses' accounts, the romantic or erotic theme that ran through so much of nursing fiction and commentary was entirely absent. In a letter published as part of the preface to Duhamel's novel, a nurse complained about the nursing romances so popular with serial writers.

Please don't believe those cute stories that come out several times a week on the fourth page of the newspaper: the model hospital installed in an old château; the wounded officer, always decorated with the Croix de Guerre, whose wound is always serious but aesthetic; the young nurse, white and blonde under her veil who, this year, has abandoned the tango for the Red Cross . . . Invariably they fall in love, will fall in love, or already have been in love.⁹⁸

Nurses refuted this scenario by portraying themselves either as "white angels," all asexual devotion, or as hard-working, exhausted professionals. Both images banished romance from the scene.

By contrast, the accounts admitted criticisms of snobbery, feminine ambition, and competition in volunteer nursing. Most agreed with commentators that some women were drawn to nursing because it had become fashionable, and some even suggested that they themselves found places through elite connections.⁹⁹ The "false" nurse, when she appeared in their pages, was usually the portrait of the society lady, like Mademoiselle Fachemine, whom La Boulaye used as a foil to her ideal nurse, Sister Rosalie. Fachemine is strongly reminiscent of Madame Heltoux in Foley's novel, *Sylvette et son blessé*, technically well-trained but eaten up with social ambition and without the requisite feminine heart. So pervasive was the cliché of the society nurse in her diamonds that Jacquemaire, by way of pointed contrast, insisted that her heroine's leather wrist watch was her only jewelry.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ For example, Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière*, 2: 4; and Mme. Henry Taudière, *En pensant aux absents: Histoire de l'ambulance de l'Absie (de septembre 1914 à mai 1915)* (Paris, 1915), *passim*.

⁹⁷ Colombel, *Journal d'une infirmière d'Arras*, 83–84; Juliette Martineau, *Journal d'une infirmière* (Angers, 1916), 28–29.

⁹⁸ Docquois preface to Duhamel, *Ces dames de l'hôpital*, 16–17.

⁹⁹ La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, 6, describes her search for a hospital post. "I quickly found what I wanted. In charge of the Red Cross hospital in Sainteville was one of the most select Sisters of Charity, whose family we knew well. She offered me the only position available, in the laundry service! Never was charity better received; I began my work the next day."

¹⁰⁰ La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*; Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 37.

In many accounts, it is not individual nurses who were bad but a system of nursing that pitted women against one another. Both Jacquemaire and La Boulaye claimed that nuns resented Red Cross volunteers and hindered their work when they could.¹⁰¹ And in 1916, when the army medical service created the paid position of temporary military nurse, it also created a new rivalry, suggested in the title of La Boulaye's memoir, *Croix et cocarde*, the cross being the Red Cross badge and the cockade, the insignia of the military nurse.¹⁰² The most disruptive conflict, however, was the rivalry of the three separate Red Cross organizations. The Société de Secours aux Blessés Militaires, founded in 1864, saw the Union des Femmes de France (1879) and the Association des Dames Françaises (1881) as interlopers; the more recent foundations accused the Société of snobbish exclusivity. "In the street, [white] vestals come across other vestals dressed in blue. These women who wear on their foreheads the sign of redemption, of mercy and peace—the cross of the Savior Jesus—exchange no greetings. They cough insolently. 'That's the enemy society that competes with us and steals our patients, a worthless society, Johnny-come-latelies . . . civil servants' wives and shop girls.'"¹⁰³ Wartime volunteer nursing, as nurses themselves depicted it in their memoirs and published diaries, was quite similar to the way it was viewed by contemporary commentators. It was the feminine version of national patriotic service, similar, if not equivalent, to military service for men. True nurses were nun-like and maternal; they were also feminine and professionally competent. False nurses, to the extent that nurses admitted they existed, also exhibited many of the qualities of which commentators complained; they were socially ambitious, self-interested, and lacked true devotion to the vocation of nursing France's wounded heroes.

However, nurses did modify the portrait of wartime nursing in interesting ways. In their depiction of the false nurse, for example, they never suggested that romantic or prurient interest was the basis of her failings. Typically, they viewed the inevitable physical contact with strange men that was inherent to the job either neutrally or as a drawback that experience eventually overcame. Several of the nurses recalled their first exposure to the naked male body, and their reaction was either revulsion or aesthetic distancing. Louise Weiss and Lola Noyr recalled being almost paralyzed with disgust on the first day of nursing at contact with male bodies. When the local curé fulminated against a young woman doing such work, Weiss was flabbergasted: "Where I felt nothing but disgust, he imagined sensuality!"¹⁰⁴ Noëlle Roger, M. de La Boulaye, and Madeleine Jacquemaire presented their reactions as aesthetic, Roger comparing the sight of a naked torso to "a painting by the Flemish

¹⁰¹ La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, 137–38; Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 10, 21–22.

¹⁰² Numerous circulars from the Service de Santé bear witness to this rivalry, exacerbated in some cases by some doctors' and hospital administrators' vindictive behavior toward the Red Cross volunteers. See the Service Historique de L'armée de Terre (hereafter, SHAT), 7 N 170 circular 20–6–1916 (June 20, 1916), and 7 N 159 circular 1–8–1916 (August 1, 1916), from the Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat du Service de Santé Militaire. By contrast, Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 161–67, clearly preferred his volunteer Red Cross nurses and heaped scorn on the paid nursing staff. But he also argued that the unpaid status of the Red Cross nurses undermined their authority over their paid subordinates.

¹⁰³ Martineau, *Journal d'une infirmière*, 2–3. Lejars, *Un hôpital militaire*, 156, recommended that Red Cross nurses from different organizations should not be assigned to work together.

¹⁰⁴ Louise Weiss, *Mémoires d'une européenne*, Vol. 1: 1893–1919 (Paris, 1968), 192.

primitives, a van der Weyden," La Boulaye to a painting by Pauline Borghese and Jacquemaire to a Greek vase.¹⁰⁵

The nurses also had a somewhat different view of the organizations in which they served, the Red Cross, the hospital, and the military, than did the commentators. Although commentators accused women of being snobbishly competitive as individuals and thus likely to be bad nurses, the nurses themselves blamed the way wartime nursing was organized for creating and exacerbating competition between nurses and institutions. Particularly in the later memoirs, they often blamed the military authorities that oversaw the administration of their hospitals for many of the problems they faced as nurses. Jacquemaire claimed that, in general, the military authorities hindered rather than helped the Red Cross: "The doctors and officials of the Medical Corps, from the orderlies up to the Inspector-General, do not suffer nurses gladly. 'Women have no place in the army so they should stay home,' they claim."¹⁰⁶ La Boulaye was the most detailed in her criticism, not only of the rivalry among the different kinds of nursing services, as we have seen, but also of how the military ran its medical auxiliaries. Her charity hospital, St. Peter's, was alternately flooded with wounded and then, just as suddenly, depleted and threatened with closure.¹⁰⁷ Nowhere in her account did she editorialize to criticize the military, nor did she need to; the disorganization, inefficiency, and waste she described is sufficient indictment.

In La Boulaye's account and several others—Madame Colombel, Julie Crémieux, Madeleine Jacquemaire—a view of the volunteer nurse tentatively emerged that was not encompassed by the commentary literature and not comprehensible in the terms of its discourse of nuns and mothers. It was the image of the nurse as the feminine equivalent of the trench fighter.¹⁰⁸ These accounts showed war nursing to be a kind of physical and emotional assault, a relentless succession of horrors and exhaustion that would stand—almost—in comparison to the conditions described in Barbusse's *Under Fire*. They depicted the wounded not as noble heroes but as only too frail mortals, torn apart in a brutal war. They certainly provided many examples of great courage in the face of suffering and of human dignity under appalling conditions, but neither did they flinch from showing fear, pain, panic, or venal sins, such as disobedience, drunkenness, or abysmal morale. And although they all surrounded their own work with a frame of feminine devotion and compassion, the picture itself was grim. Colombel described being overwhelmed with horrendously wounded men in a nonstop triage, an exhausting sequence of dressings, operations, and death. Crémieux, working in field hospitals, added 'round-the-clock bombard-

¹⁰⁵ Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière*, 1: 24; La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, 89; Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 151.

¹⁰⁶ Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 91, confirmed by Service de Santé correspondence. Not until 1917 did the Service de Santé begin to try to replace male orderlies with female nurses. See SHAT, 16 N 2682 GQG DA, Service de Santé Personnel.

¹⁰⁷ La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁸ The most obvious attempt to appropriate trench-fighter status to women is the British novel *Not So Quiet . . . Stepdaughters of War*, by Helen Zenna Smith, a pseudonym for Evadne Price, published in 1930. Not only does the title make the parallel to Remarque's novel, but the structure, language, and denouement of the story parallels that of the "classic" trench-fighter novel, complete with the (spiritual) death of the heroine at the end and the evocation of a Lost (Female) Generation. See Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*, 36–46.

ment and lack of sleep. To this, Jacquemaire, serving in the Verdun sector, added mud, bone-chilling cold, rats, rotten food, lack of letters, and lack of clean underwear. Jeanne Antelme, on the Turkish front, included brutal heat, polluted water, insects, and a typhoid epidemic; La Boulaye, a pneumonia epidemic. Almost all recalled breaking down emotionally or physically at some point, especially bouts with depression. Both La Boulaye and Antelme stopped keeping their diaries, on which their memoirs are based, due to emotional and mental exhaustion.¹⁰⁹ Many of the nurses even claimed to share the dangers and risk of death with the soldiers. Léonie Godfroy was captured and spent some months in a prison camp. And Roger went them one better; her *Les carnets d'une infirmière*, she claimed, was the diary of a war martyr, a nurse who had died when a flu epidemic swept the hospital in which she worked.¹¹⁰

If, for these nurses, the major enemy was the war itself, the military was not exempt from blame. Like trench-fighter memoirists, a few of the nurses depicted military authority as an obstacle if not an outright enemy. Just as junior officers complained of futile paperwork, Jacquemaire railed against the all-important Form 46 that had to be filled out for each wounded man before medical treatment could begin. The military personnel and the staff doctors, in her account, had rulebooks in place of hearts and put their own comfort and routines ahead of the welfare of the wounded.¹¹¹ At one point, Colombel did the unthinkable from the perspective of the nurse-as-nun; she criticized and disobeyed the surgeon under whom she found herself working, giving chloroform to a howling soldier when the surgeon had refused to sedate him.¹¹² But in one important way, these nursing memoirs differentiated themselves from the accounts of front fighters. In almost all the writings of trench soldiers, the hero was less an individual than a group of buddies, a brotherhood, in Mosse's term. The most famous example is Barbusse's *Under Fire*, subtitled *History of a Squad*. French nursing memoirs, by contrast, did not focus on a team of nurses. Their authors rarely drew portraits of their colleagues except as ideal types—*la vraie* or the society lady. From a few glancing references,¹¹³ we can speculate that in fact the friendships that formed between nurses in hospitals as between men in the trenches were often important to making their lives and work bearable, but such glimpses are few and far between.

Volunteer nurses could easily have portrayed themselves as a feminine collectivity; they had an obvious model right before their eyes in the Catholic nursing orders that had endowed French nursing with both the form and language of sisterhood. However, the nurse-memoirists chose not to do so, and for good reason. By constructing the war as a combat to remasculinize the French nation, the War Myth had not only excluded French women from the war experience, it had

¹⁰⁹ In her novel *Ces dames de l'hôpital*, 156–57, Duhamel set her characters a game of defining depression, but the nursing accounts make it clear that the disorder was no game but was seriously debilitating. See, for example, Colombel, *Journal d'une infirmière d'Arras*, 37–40; Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 235; La Boulaye, *Croix et cocarde*; and Antelme, *Avec l'armée d'orient*.

¹¹⁰ Godfroy, *Souvenirs d'ambulance*; Roger, *Les carnets d'une infirmière*, 1: 5–9.

¹¹¹ Jacquemaire, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, especially the vignettes "Septs cents pieds gelés" and "Les rentrants."

¹¹² Colombel, *Journal d'une infirmière d'Arras*, 100–01.

¹¹³ For example, Jacquemaire's gratitude toward her assistant, *Les hommes de bonne volonté*, 83–84; and Crémieux's description of falling asleep on a friend's shoulder in a dugout; *Croquis d'heures vécues*, 46.

positioned femininity as hostile to the war. Anything women did to contribute to the war, even nursing its wounded heroes, was suspect. Women, by their collective efforts, however well-intentioned, risked losing the real war, the war to restore French masculine supremacy. Inevitably, to represent nursing as a collective female war experience would raise once again the specter of an alternative feminine war undermining or even opposing the national war effort.

Volunteer nurses suppressed the sisterhood of nursing in their memoirs in order to insist that they were fighting the same war as the soldiers, the masculine war, the trench-fighters' war. Their accounts focused almost all the attention on the relationship between the nurse and the wounded soldier, not as a romantic or erotic tie but as comrades in arms and accomplices in suffering, in league against the brutal enemy and the callous authorities. But, even then, nurses could not risk claiming an equal experience to the soldiers', an equal sacrifice to the national cause; since masculinity had to triumph, it was not a camaraderie of equals that they depicted but the nurse as the soldier's disciple.¹¹⁴ Exhausted or frightened or sick as she was, it was his suffering that caused hers. Antelme wrote, "You know, those agonies, they tear the soul, and to know your impotence to stop that suffering, that is the worst of all."¹¹⁵ As her emotional anguish reflected his physical pain, so, too, did her war experience reflect his. Rather than commemorating a unique feminine experience, in account after account memoirists subordinated the nurse's story to the soldier's.

In the end, the nurses' memoirs, like the commentaries, left intact the incongruity, even the opposition, of women and war. Targets of as much criticism as praise, nurses in their memoirs absolved themselves of the charge of pursuing feminine emancipation, solidarity, and values at the expense of masculine suffering by subordinating their wartime experience to the soldier's story. Rather than script a role for the volunteer nurse alongside the soldier in the War Myth, even the grimmest and most "realistic" of the nurses' memoirs placed the wounded soldier on a pedestal and the nurse, head bowed, at his feet, her emotional suffering a tribute to his sacrifice. In their personal accounts, France's nurse memoirists helped erase their own experiences from the public memory of the war. Their works did not reshape the War Myth to include women; instead, they commemorated World War I as the trench-fighters' war and the confirmed essence of the war experience as masculinity.

¹¹⁴ Klaus Theweleit, "Bomb's Womb and the Genders of War," in Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), 285, writes: "The war of genders is wonderful for re-winning lost wars because of its very certain result: men never lose, women have to."

¹¹⁵ Antelme, *Avec l'armée d'orient*, 35.

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