



## Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /  
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

2 | 2010

Voicing Conflict : Women and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Warfare

---

## Introduction

Karen Meschia

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4771>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.4771

ISSN: 2108-6559

### Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

### Electronic reference

Karen Meschia, "Introduction", *Miranda* [Online], 2 | 2010, Online since 03 July 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/4771> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.4771>

---

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

---

# Introduction

Karen Meschia

---

- 1 Feminist scholarship over recent decades has been particularly valuable in bringing to the fore not only the specific ways in which 20th-century armed conflict challenged the shared, common-sense construction of warfare as “men's work”, but also the extent to which the shifting status of men and women's roles in wartime often seemed to operate as a double-edged weapon, or, to borrow Margaret and Patrice Higonnet's image, a “double helix” (Higonnet *in* Higonnet et al. 31) for women, simultaneously offering opportunities for emancipation and foreclosing any lasting attempt to transgress traditional gender roles. Jean Bethke Elshtain's “Just Warriors-Beautiful Souls” persona<sup>1</sup> encapsulate the deep-seated, largely unconscious presuppositions about gender and war to which such transgression posed a threat; as she makes clear, “these tropes on the social identities of men and women, past and present, do not denote what men and women really are in time of war, but function instead to re-create and secure women's location as non-combatants and men's as warriors” (Elshtain 4).
- 2 Although any intention to discover “what men and women really are” in situations of conflict may today seem an illusory quest, a huge body of academic research in a wide range of fields, continues to contribute to a better understanding of what men and women *did* in wartime, of the institutional and political arrangements which framed their choices, and, just as significantly here, of the forms of artistic expression chosen and the social and cultural contexts drawn upon to confer meaning upon their experience. The collection of articles in this issue seeks to pursue the exploration of the complex interrelation between gendered ideological constructions, material constraints and individual agency which frames women's wartime experience. Working within a variety of disciplinary traditions, with different sources and methodologies, each contribution engages with the problematic of gendering conflict from its own perspective, and yet the common concerns, recurrent questions and multiple echoes set up by having these texts converse, provide thematic unity, whilst shedding new light in some unexplored areas.
- 3 Three threads, each relating to problematics familiar to women's studies, are clearly discernable as running through the whole. The first, fundamental to all, concerns the

wider implications for women of “total war”, which not only drew them into the front line, creating new roles and transforming old ones, but blurred the boundaries between combatant and non-combatant positions, thus recasting the “dense symbiosis” (Elshtain 4) between male and female in wartime by extending the range of social identities available to women. The second relates to “the question of voice” (Goldman 8): the difficulty for women of finding or forging a legitimate voice, an authorial position from which to convey experience, impeded as they were, if not reduced to silence, both by the man-made language at their disposal and by the male prerogative over their subject matter: war. Finally, and to some degree the corollary of this quest for an authoritative voice, the vexed question, most famously raised by Virginia Woolf, of the relation between war, patriotism and patriarchy, which seems to cast women, willy-nilly, as peacemakers, if not “outsiders”.<sup>2</sup> It thus seems fitting to approach these texts as offering a sequence of “voices” that represent renewed or reinvented modes of expression for capturing women's experience.

## 1. Front Line voices / *Voix sur la ligne de front*

- 4 Sandra Gilbert describes World War I as “a paradigm of technological combat” (Gilbert in Higonnet et al. 197), involving as it did widespread use of mines, gases, zeppelins and tanks and, for the first time, not only mass conscription of huge armies of men called up to die in trench warfare, but civilian casualties, as aerial bombardment grew apace. Much has been written too, about how the Great War continues to resonate as “the dominant cultural perspective for the 20th century” (Goldman 1) on the contradictory, tightly enmeshed issues of patriotism and pacifism, sacrifice, heroism, emasculation and human waste such conflict entails. The modified gender relations thrown up by World War I bore the mark of these contradictions. In the initial “war fever” they were exhorted patriotically to encourage their men folk to fight—as exemplified in the “Women of Britain say 'Go!’” war poster<sup>3</sup>—but women's subsequent voluntary enlistment to replace conscripted husbands, fathers and sons, was to lead them both into engineering and munitions factories at home and onto the front line as nurses, drivers and auxiliaries. At two negative extremes, women might thus be simultaneously represented as Medusa-like figures, safe on the Home Front, sacrificing their men as cannon-fodder, unauthorised experientially to voice the sufferings of war, or alternatively as usurpers of the traditional markers of masculinity, parading their victorious femininity before battle-scarred, shell-shocked survivors from the trenches.
- 5 Margaret Higonnet's opening article provides an admirable analysis of the interpenetration of technological and social change, with the attendant opportunity for women of creating innovative narrative forms. New technology changed not only how war was waged, but how it was seen, as women photographers, professional and amateur, were given the opportunity to be present on the front line. By exploring the work of amateur and professional women photographers and the memoirs of two Red Cross nurses, M. Higonnet suggests that a new war genre, the “photo-text” gave women the freedom “to write a new kind of history of the female self in the world of conflict”. Also exploiting original war archives, Claire Bowen draws on Pierre Bourdieu's use of the “rite of passage” as a way of interpreting the ambivalent, gender-inflected attitudes to the military uniform and medals: hostile to women, charged with virile sexuality for men. The war diary of a World War I female British Administrator in Normandy serves

as the basis for a nuanced analysis of how the reality of active service for women might have seemed to abolish gender barriers, whilst maintaining pre-war sex hierarchies, in subtle, often symbolic ways.

- 6 The final article in this section takes us in an imaginative leap from World War I to the late twentieth, early 21st century, offering what could be seen as a latter-day avatar of the earlier war photographers in Maggie Allison's account of the career of the iconic BBC war reporter Kate Adie. Allison uses some original interview material with Adie in order to examine the ways in which this journalist, whilst somewhat eschewing gender-based analyses of her success, is nevertheless constrained to negotiate in practical ways her status as a woman in what remains a male-dominated arena.

## 2 Home Front voices / *Voix du Home Front*

- 7 World War I, in heralding the advent of modern warfare, was also characterised by the consequent gulf of incommunicability created between those who experienced fighting in the trenches and the rest. It was in World War II, Churchill's "War of the Unknown Warriors"<sup>4</sup>—"The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in the towns and streets"<sup>5</sup>—that the full implications of total war were directly experienced by those remaining on the Home Front, notably in Britain, which provides the geographical locus of this section. Penny Summerfield's concluding article underlines the continuing influence on popular imagination of this "People's War" and it is difficult to overestimate the extent to which the construction of a sense of national identity is still tied up with what Angus Calder termed *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991). Women at home were not only faced with the hardships of the blackout, air-raids, rationing and restrictions, but, for the first time ever saw their children evacuated to places of safety, as they themselves were conscripted in their thousands into the armed forces or "directed" in their millions into war factories. Quite how and why such widespread, active participation was seemingly perceived as being "for the duration" only by men and women alike is an ongoing topic of academic interest for understanding the subsequent post-war position of British women. Here, the articles included focus on gaining insight into the ways the very different experiences of women on the Home Front have been mediated through cinematic representations of them and through their own fictional and autobiographical writing.
- 8 Given the huge popularity of cinema-going (after a brief initial period of closure) as a wartime leisure activity, it is clear that much was at stake in the way women, in their new military and civilian roles, were represented on the screen. Elizabeth de Cacqueray's analysis of a selection of films from the 1940s explores how the unstable power relations between men and women that resulted from these wartime changes were inscribed in filmic representations, which alternately accorded unprecedented linguistic and martial powers to women, re-allocated gendered spatial arrangements between the public and the private, yet were, not infrequently, framed in a discourse that underlined the transient nature of such changes.
- 9 If E. de Cacqueray's article suggests possible new voices for women in film, the articles by Céline Magot and Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud that follow, while approaching the theme from two very different perspectives, are both concerned with the question of women's silence, or of their flawed speech, in the face of the oppression, or the horror, that conflict generates. C. Magot's analysis of a wartime short story by Elizabeth Bowen

subtly interweaves contextual elements relating to government propaganda of the time warning against fifth column activities, with a close textual reading which, drawing on Foucault's use of the discursive tension between *logophilia* and *logophobia*, teases out the intricacies of a dialogue where an abundance of words points to existential aporia and where silence becomes an instrument of power, with men and women playing out the new identities forced upon them in wartime by reactivating old sex archetypes.

- 10 The latent anxiety and *ennui* conveyed in Bowen's work are oppressive enough; Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud's article on the autobiographical writing of Eva Figes takes us into a deeper, darker region of silence inhabited by the grey, ghostly figures of the victims of the Holocaust. The article is original on two counts: first in introducing the reader into the imaginative world of a writer who has received relatively little attention in France, secondly in offering a view of wartime Britain from the perspective of a German Jewish refugee. Alienated linguistically and emotionally from her past, isolated and weighed down by the silence of her elders, the seven-year-old child Figes writes of in 1939 can only confusedly perceive exclusion, guilt and sorrow for herself in her mother's inability to name the unnameable: "the horror". N. Vincent-Arnaud elegantly unravels the multiple strands of Figes' narrative voices to show how the writer ultimately arrives at a fragile form of personal salvation through the construction of an autobiographical "I" that confronts both silence and History.
- 11 A valuable source of documents providing personal, lived accounts of Home Front Britain, particularly those of women, has emerged over the last thirty years or so with the publication, in different forms, of some part of the British Mass-Observation Archive, still unexploited in its entirety. The final two articles in the section both deal with M-O material. Karen Meschia, concerned, like N. Vincent-Arnaud, with how women appropriate the autobiographical genre, uses the published war diaries of Naomi Mitchison and Nella Last to explore what their testimonies reveal about the ways gender and social class intersect; after setting in contrast two widely differing world views, she then goes on to look more closely at how the two wartime identities that gradually emerge from the hundreds of written pages also position the two women very differently as mothers engaging with the experience of exile and alienation that is the corollary, literal or metaphorical, of war.
- 12 In a final, entirely original contribution to this section, Penny Summerfield brings the topic of perceptions of World War II up to the present day. She here delivers the initial findings of her own research, undertaken in Spring 2009, when a Mass-Observation "directive" or questionnaire, was sent out to a panel of respondents on her behalf, with the aim of obtaining first-hand accounts from people of all generations relating to "the meaning of the Second World War in personal lives since 1945". P. Summerfield works within the premise that popular cultural forms have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in how such meaning is constructed, both individually and collectively; this, interestingly, is corroborated by the frequent references from women to the importance of the figure of Nella Last in their perception of women's wartime roles. P. Summerfield deploys the concept of "composure", which has served as a powerful analytical tool in some of her previous works, in order to apprehend the widely differing psychological states, as revealed through the testimonies, that such memory work seemingly gives rise to.

### 3. Voices for peace / *Voix pour la paix*

- 13 The earlier reference to v. Woolf's "society of outsiders" provides a way into the question of women's vocation as peace-makers that foregrounds her refusal to be cast, by virtue of her sex, in any pre-ordained role whatsoever within a patriarchal society which deprives her of agency. Olive Schreiner's: "she knows the history of human flesh; she knows its cost; he does not [...]. We pay the first cost on all human life." (Schreiner 1978, 169) offers another angle of approach. Although feminist analyses have served to make the automatic association between women and pacifism, or peace-building, a contested area, pointing as it does to a form of essentialism that is rejected by many, this does not preclude recognising, and paying close attention to the specific modes of action and expression, frequently the only ones available to them, by which women have sought to make their voices heard and end conflict. The long-standing tradition of women's internationalist peace movements, from The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom created in 1915 to today's codepink4peace is a historical and social reality, whatever reading of its gender-based foundations we choose to make. Interestingly—perhaps fittingly—the selection of articles relating to the question here, after a first inquiry into the philosophical origins and practical implications of the "woman as peacemaker" trope, all offer poetic voices.
- 14 Starting from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* to arrive at Carol Gilligan's philosophy of care, Cyril Selzner retraces the fortunes of what he terms the "myth"—revisiting Nietzsche and Foucault—of the female peacemaker. Drawing on a wide range of sources: philosophical, aetiological and sociological, he shows how the myth has been transposed, transformed, subverted into "countermyth", sometimes at the expense of women, sometimes to their advantage. C. Selzner's conclusion suggests new avenues for working with the myth as a way to empowerment. Nicole Ollier's sensitive appraisal of the poetry of Olga Broumas provides an appropriate way to continue the examination of how mythical sources may be reworked. She shows how the poet, in her self-chosen exile from a strife-ridden, patriarchal Greek society to the United States, is empowered to create a new persona in the wake of Sappho, where pacific lesbianism and the therapy of touch combine with a new voice, mingling ancient Greek myth, fairy-tale and overt, explicit eroticism, which announce the coming of a female divinity, who "claps and claps her one hand".
- 15 The link between pacifism and female poetic voices is also underscored, this time bringing the reader back to the Great War, by Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec in her account of the circumstances in which Harriet Monroe's Chicago *Poetry* magazine issued the first "War Number", with its prize-winning contribution from Alice Driscoll, provoking the "war poem scandal" and a rift with the (then *Imagiste*) Ezra Pound, amongst other male poets. At issue is the gendered access to an authorial voice in wartime, here the suggested indecency for women of writing about the horrors of a war of which they have no experience. Pound's ironic "War Verse" sums this up: "O two-penny poets, be still!—[...] / Be still, give the soldiers their turn, / And do not be trying to scrape your two-penny glory / From the ruins of Louvain,". However Pound's poem also raises the wider question, implicit throughout the article, of finding an appropriate mode of expression during and after the desolation of World War I. It is a literary commonplace to consider that Modernism grew out of the Apocalypse that was the Great War. The

final article in this section examines how one woman writer and poet engaged with the implications of modernism subsequently.

- 16 J. Kilgore-Caradec mentions that one of the contributors to Pound's *Des Imagistes* in 1914 was H.D.. Hilda Doolittle, the American born poet and writer, who left America in 1911 and was living in London during World War II, is the subject of the final article by Suzanne Hobson, which picks up and pursues questions raised both by Ollier and Kilgore-Caradec in a deftly handled exploration of the use of the *angelus militans* figure, from Milton to Klee, and finally in H.D.'s World War II poems. S. Hobson begins by offering an enlightening reading of the way World War II represented the “cutting-off or perverse fulfilment” of the “machine-dreams” characterising first-wave modernism, dreams which H.D. eventually came to perceive as “purely masculine and military”, as personified by writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis. In a world where religious consolation no longer offers purchase, H.D.'s war poems seek to reinvest the *angelus militans* figure with a new, esoteric set of beliefs where sexual difference and conflict are rejected to create a new fragile equilibrium between men and woman coming together in quest of peace.
- 17 The contributors to this issue would be delighted to receive your comments, criticisms, suggestions and questions on *Miranda's* forum.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Calder, A. *The Myth of the Blitz*. London: Pimlico, 1991.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Women and War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Gilbert, Sandra. “Soldier’s Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women and the Great War.” In *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Eds. M.R. Higonnet et al. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987. 197-226.

Goldman, Dorothy (ed.). *Women and World War 1. The Written Response*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993.

Higonnet, M.R., J. Jenson, S. Michel, M. Collins Weitz. (eds.). *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1987.

Schreiner, Olive. *Women and Labour*. 1911. London: Virago, 1978.

Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. London : Hogarth Press, 1938.

## NOTES

1. “We in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories. Thus in time of war, real men and women—locked in a dense symbiosis, perceived as beings who have complementary needs and exemplify

gender-specific virtues—take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls.” (Elshtain 4)

2. “[...] if you insist on fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex-instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share [...] As a woman I have no country [...] as a woman, my country is the whole world.”

(Woolf 197)

3. Can be viewed on the Imperial War Museum collections website.

4. BBC Broadcast, London July 14, 1940 BBC Broadcast, London.

5. BBC Broadcast, London August 20, 1940

---

## AUTHOR

**KAREN MESCHIA**

Maître de conférences

Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail

karen.meschia@univ-tlse2.fr