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**“Every Man Who Dies, Dies
for You and Me. See You Be
Worthy”: The Image of the Hero as
Rhetorical Motivation in Unofficial
War Propaganda, 1914-1918**

 Dorothy Goldman has said that “[t]he anguish of the trenches, still reverberating in Western culture, has meant that to pay attention to anything else appears to demean that suffering.”¹ And yet, a large part of the anguish of the trenches was the sense that the combatants had been betrayed by a civilian population that was eager for war. As Robert Graves says in his memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, “England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war madness that ran wild everywhere [...]. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language.”² One of the most haunting aspects of Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* is her sense of “the terrible barrier of knowledge by which War cut off the men who possessed it from the women who [...] remained in ignorance.”³ We need, then, to look closely at that “newspaper language” to see how and why it was able to create such a profound division between combatants and civilians.

During the First World War, the British press paid close attention to the home front, to women who suddenly found themselves in unfamiliar and often contradictory roles. Women had to be “women”; they had to represent home and hearth so that men knew what it was they were fighting for. But simultaneously women were asked to redefine their personal, domestic concerns in political, public terms. Women still had to be “the weaker sex,” but they were expected to face the daily realities of wartime with courage and “pluck,” not with womanly tears. Propaganda was needed to negotiate this conflict between the personal and the political, to make women comfortable with their new political roles while reinforcing their traditional, domestic ones. The women’s papers of the Amalgamated Press, owned by the jingoistic Lord Northcliffe, were willing purveyors of this propaganda. The unofficial⁴ propaganda in these “everyday

texts" affected women week in and week out during the war. Glenn Stillar argues that, while "everyday texts" may be "quotidian," they are not necessarily trivial: "Because they both reflect and shape our attitudes towards our worlds and one another, the consequences that attend everyday texts are serious, complex, and often far-reaching."⁵ One of the weekly papers published by The Amalgamated Press, *The Family Journal*, will provide the texts for this study.

Jacques Ellul argues that propaganda is not a single entity but rather is a sociological, multifaceted phenomenon.⁶ By "sociological," Ellul means that propaganda is not created by the powerful and imposed on the less powerful, but rather that it responds to a need in those who will sustain it. Because no one likes to admit to having been "manipulated," propaganda must somehow justify itself and engender a willing complicity in the propagandee, and it does so by adapting and utilizing existing opinion and belief. Ellul calls this process "integration propaganda," the type of propaganda that aims at stabilizing, unifying, and reinforcing the social body—the type of propaganda that performs an ideological function.⁷

The mandate of *The Family Journal* was to give advice to women on domestic matters, and in so doing, to define what it meant to be a woman. In this enterprise, *The Family Journal* was simply following a long tradition of women's periodicals, a tradition that had naturalized the defining of femininity and the codifying of feminine behavior.⁸ Women's magazines did not so much "represent" women as "re-present" women to themselves. As Ellul notes, the tendency to define the individual "in terms of what [she] has in common with others, such as [her] motivations, [her] feelings, or [her] myths,"⁹ is a significant step in the process of integration propaganda. *The Family Journal*, then, can assure women that cherished notions of "woman" are still true, still appropriate, even though they have to be adapted to suit the changes precipitated by war, and it offers the expert advice of its columnists on how to adapt to those changes.

One of the problems with creating propaganda out of already existing ideals of womanhood is that war goes against all the domestic notions of nurturance that had been inculcated in generations of women. What was needed was propaganda that would, as Claire Tylee says, convince both men and women that women concurred with the war effort.¹⁰ As Ellul recognizes, propaganda must create enough anxiety and tension to goad people to action, but not so much to demoralize them.¹¹ The propaganda in *The Family Journal* accomplishes this fine balance¹² by mobilizing the linguistic resources of hierarchy. Kenneth Burke argues that hierarchies occur because language allows for the concept of the negative; with the negative we are able to make discriminations, divisions, and stratifications. Hierarchies form around "the relation of higher to lower, [...] or before to after,"¹³ and they create differences of kind or degree. While hierarchies

themselves are not inevitable—hierarchies form, crumble, and dissolve—the hierarchical principle itself is inevitable.¹⁴ The hierarchical principle is based on the idea of teleology—an end point of perfection. Each hierarchy is directed, controlled, or driven by what Burke calls a “god term,” a summarizing term that gives meaning and place to all the others.¹⁵ In hierarchies of kind, which are often simple binaries of “this/not this,” one term is valorized and takes precedence over the other. In a discourse of war, the terms “combatant” and “front” are imbued by the god term “war” with more symbolic capital than are the terms “non-combatant” and “home front.” The hierarchy of front/home front and combatant/non-combatant is clear in this simple example from *The Family Journal* from 1916: “This is a war in which the whole British people must bear their several parts—the women and the weaklings as well as the strong, fit, fighting men.”¹⁶ The part that women and “weaklings” can play in the war effort is necessarily inferior to that played by “strong, fit, fighting men.” As Burke says, hierarchies of any sort, based on “the *discriminations* we make by language” place people above or below each other, and they become “‘mysteries’ to each other.”¹⁷

Burke also says that “mystery arises at the point where different *kinds* of beings are in communication.”¹⁸ The war has essentially made different *kinds* of beings of men and women. Women are confined to the home front, a safe, familiar, comfortable place, while men go to the front, an unknown, dangerous, foreign place. The front becomes synonymous with “over there,” “the fields of Flanders,” or “the far-flung battle-line in the East.” Because it is unknown, it becomes a mystery, and mystery creates a powerful rhetorical appeal. Because the civilians at home knew little of the realities of the war, every soldier could legitimately be portrayed in the texts as a “hero,” enshrouded as the men were in the mystery of the unknown “front.” This assumption of heroism means that every mother can know “that her boy was so brave, that he patiently bore his trials as a soldier, and was so bright in the face of danger, and met his death like a hero.”¹⁹ Encouraging mothers to believe that their sons are heroes provides a “motivational appeal” for women to do their own duty.

That combatants and non-combatants, particularly women who are confined to the home front, have become different kinds of beings is apparent by the change one of the columnists makes in his wording. When he chastises “girls” for not recognizing what men have given up in going to war, he begins by saying that women “don’t—they cannot realise” the nature of the sacrifice made on their behalf.²⁰ The correction he makes is significant. If women simply “don’t” know, they can always learn; but if they “cannot” know, then they are shut out from that knowledge, shut out from the “mystery” of masculine sacrifice. Curiously, though, all the columnists, both male and female, claim insight into the mysteries of the

front and use that insight to create the tension that Ellul recognizes as a necessary part of propaganda. The front, claims one columnist, “has ennobled your lad. [...] [I]t has turned him from a boy to a man, from [...] a tiresome self-willed lad to a stalwart soldier, khaki-clad, smart, well-drilled, possessed by a wholesome pride and self-respect, resolved to do his bit to help his country.”²¹

Susan Grayzel convincingly argues that the boundary between “front” and “home front” was much less stable and rigid than traditional studies of war have suggested. The war intruded into the home front through bombing raids; combatants and civilians alike contracted and spread venereal disease; women went to the front as nurses and ambulance drivers, and combatants returned home. The boundaries were crossed linguistically as well when news about the war, censored though it was, brought the front into the home front. Civilian efforts to provide munitions, and women’s efforts to ration food and to encourage their men to go to war, were, Grayzel argues, “essential to the war’s outcome.” Grayzel concludes that “historians must view the experience of war along a continuum, rather than divide it into the categories of ‘front line’ and ‘home front,’ as if one type of war experience was somehow more authentic than another.”²² However, it was in the interests of contemporary propaganda to create and sustain this linguistic hierarchy of front and home front; it needed to sustain the sense that the experience of the front was more authentic than that of the home front if it was to incite women to do their duty. This tendency to authenticate the experience of the front can be seen in the way in which the discourse of war usurps the traditional roles of women which had been established and fostered through women’s magazines during the 19th century and which saw “the work of personal relationships and moral sustenance [. . .] as woman’s most important domestic activity.”²³

Peter Buitenhuis says that the “myth and romance of the trenches,” propagated by authors such as Kipling and Conan Doyle, served to make “the trench the moral as well as the physical bulwark against the Hun.”²⁴ In one of her columns, Mrs. Wise talks about the changes that she has observed in the son of friend, a young man who has returned, wounded, from the front. He “seems to understand everything so much better,” she says, and, taking on the role of omniscient narrator, she concludes:

All that has made Jim realise how much these things mean—how greatly to be prized are the people we love. That is the lesson it should teach you and me. [...] [W]e who have been left more or less comfortably at home must remember the lesson that men are learning in the trenches, and women in

the hospitals—namely, how great a blessing is peace, and quiet human love, and how much we should all prize it.²⁵

The men and women at the front are learning “lessons” about morality and personal relationships firsthand, through bitter experience, while women, who are “comfortably” at home have the lessons mediated for them. Women may still be the keepers of morality, but it is a domestic morality that remains ignorant of the greater “lessons” occasioned by the war. It remains tied to the realm of personal happiness, a morality that makes “the home so happy that the spirit of happiness remains all day with those who work away from it.”²⁶

Similarly, sacrifice had long been the purview of women; indeed, even in 1916 *The Family Journal* says, “Woman is born to be the better half. Her capacity for sacrifice and ministry is the salvation of the race.”²⁷ Yet the discourse of the war has men making “the ultimate sacrifice.” Hierarchically, there can be nothing above “ultimate”; it is the entelechy, the end point of perfection. The Christological associations of the nature of the sacrifice and its redemptive qualities are apparent: Mrs. Wise says, “There is no waste about the life of a man, however young, who dies for Right and Truth. His life is perfectly complete. He dies in order that life itself may be a purer and finer thing. He dies, and in his very death conquers Wrong.”²⁸ By making the ultimate sacrifice, combatants have moved up the hierarchical ladder; they have, in fact, transcended it. They have attained and then surpassed that worldly perfection that goads us, leaving the survivors uncomfortably aware of their own imperfection, their own indebtedness for the sacrifice that makes life a “purer and finer thing.” Women, by virtue of being women, cannot fight, and are therefore incapable of progressing any further up the hierarchical ladder of patriotic duty that leads to the ultimate sacrifice. The commonly held belief in what Vera Brittain calls “heroism in the abstract”²⁹ ennobled death in the trenches. Ironically, the noble deaths of sons, husbands, sweethearts, brothers became a way for women to gain patriotic favor, albeit vicariously. In the words of Mrs. Wise, “[I]t is a great privilege to have the memory of such a noble death.”³⁰ Private grief, private misery, if allowed to be indulged, could too easily become an argument against the war. But private grief, transformed into feminine sacrifice, becomes part of feminine duty, even if that sacrifice and duty are inferior to masculine sacrifice and duty. Mothers must be “thankful and proud that [they] had such a gift to give”³¹

In women’s periodicals before the war, the quintessentially feminine need, according to Margaret Beetham, was “the desire to be desired,”³² and women’s periodicals were there to give advice on creating a femininity that could be desired. It is an easy step for the war propaganda to adapt and transform this “desire to be

desired" into the desire to be worthy of the sacrifice. When the columnist "Y.Z." says that "the women of England must be brave and try to be worthy of their men,"³³ or when "Bridget" issues the subjunctive injunction, "SEE YOU BE WORTHY,"³⁴ they essentially set up a double bind for women. Being worthy, even if it is successful, implies hierarchy because one has to be worthy of something or someone who is necessarily higher on the hierarchy. What women do is assessed and valued in terms of what men do.³⁵ Women are not "worthy" in and of themselves but rather because men have shown reverence for them. Mrs. Wise perhaps sums this double bind up best: "Because of their love and reverence for their wives, their sweethearts, their sisters, their mothers, the British soldiers are always gentlemen. [...] Therefore, we women of Britain must show ourselves worthy of this reverence and honour which our men have for us, and at the same time we must show our menfolk we have gained some of their high-souled courage."³⁶

However, if women are categorically shut out from the perfection afforded to combatants, they are offered images of perfection of their own which are, ostensibly at least, attainable and are therefore able to mitigate the demoralizing effects of hierarchies of kind. Women are offered expert advice on how to be good and patriotic women in wartime. But even these hierarchies of degree are informed by the discourse of war, creating what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca have called a "double hierarchy."³⁷ Being a good woman in the domestic women's magazine always meant keeping a neat, clean home that would provide a refuge from the outside world. But in wartime, keeping a neat clean home becomes a patriotic feminine duty, because, as Mrs. Wise says, "To woman it has been given to guard the inside of the home, to keep it sweet and pure, to make it worthy to be loved, worthy to be praised, worthy to be worshipped, worthy that a man should die for it. Do not forget, then sisters, how great a treasure you guard."³⁸

One of the ways in which desirability is transformed into worthiness is through the operation of mythology. The association of chivalry with the Great War is a commonplace; the war itself was seen as a just and holy war, the soldiers as medieval crusaders. But if the combatants are crusaders, the women for whom they are fighting are elevated to the stature of medieval maidens. Again, it is Mrs. Wise who makes the association perfectly clear:

Take the soldier in his khaki uniform; take the Crusader in his glittering armour, and before you stand two men exactly similar, brave, fearless, going forth to fight for Truth and Right, and by the side of each stands a girl, with fearless, British true eyes, who belts his sword upon her hero, and tells him to go forth.³⁹

Roland Barthes sees myth as “a second order semiological system”;⁴⁰ that is, it springs from the already established semiological system of language. The sign of myth has become culturally enhanced; it is fuller, richer, more “meaning-ful” than the sign in the language system. Because of this fullness, myths are so forceful, says Barthes, that they operate to impose meaning.⁴¹ War appropriates the mythologies of chivalry and the codes of behavior for both medieval knights and ladies, or at least a Victorian revisioning of them.⁴² As ordinary men become ennobled by becoming soldiers, chivalric heroes, women must be worthy of them by becoming “ladies.” “Mother,” another of the regular columnists, explains what it means to be a lady: “To be a lady means rightly to be a gentlewoman [...]; a woman whose heart is pure [...]. She is pure and good in every detail of life, a true friend, and a ‘ministering angel’ in sorrow and sickness.”⁴³ Feminine virtue sets off, inspires, masculine greatness. Even as late as 1918 “Y.Z.” is still able to invoke the mystery of the trenches to motivate women to aspire to the feminine virtue that will in turn inspire masculine heroism. He assumes that a soldier in his trench will find inspiration from his “girl” at home: “He thinks of his girl patiently waiting for his return, and always anxious about him. ‘Dear little girl,’ he whispers to himself, ‘There isn’t another like her.’ And this thought of home keeps him cheery and bright, and braces him for fresh effort, fresh endurance.”⁴⁴

While the vocabulary of chivalry became increasingly difficult to maintain as the war went on,⁴⁵ the mythology of chivalry remained, although somewhat subdued, because of the way in which the “semiological chain”⁴⁶ of mythology is structured; to deny one element is to set off a reaction that reverberates through the chain. For women to reject the mythologized role of medieval “ladies” would be to deny the role of their men as mythologized chivalric heroes; to deny the myth of the war as crusade would be to deny the sanctity of the deaths of the men who made the ultimate sacrifice. Having cast the combatants in a Christological role, it is tantamount to sacrilege to question the reason for their deaths.

Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* is in part a testament to the power of English propaganda; as Lynne Layton points out, it is an attempt to warn the next generation, who were facing the specter of another war, not to be fooled by propaganda.⁴⁷ Ellul, however, would say that Brittain’s efforts could only be in vain because “[p]ropaganda has [...] as its essential task, to reproduce innocence from generation to generation.”⁴⁸ It does so, he says, by reinterpreting facts and obliterating history, so that each new generation faces it fresh. It does so, I would add, by employing the cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic resources of hierarchy, mystery and mythology. Propaganda tells people what they should think; it provides them with ready-made opinions, and it makes propagandees complicit in the process by fulfilling a need in them. In this case, it gave the

civilian population a mythologized image of a just war, of chivalric heroes whose noble deaths created a need for women to be worthy of the sacrifice. The last word has to go to Mrs. Wise: "He gave his life for his Country and for Right. Who can give more? Who else dare give so much?"⁴⁹

Notes

1. Dorothy Goldman, introduction to *Women and World War I: The Written Response*, ed. Dorothy Goldman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 2.
2. Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929; London: Penguin, 1960), 188.
3. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (1933; New York: Seaview Books, 1980), 215.
4. In "The Blood of Our Sons": *Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (New York: Macmillan 2002), Nicoletta F. Gullace suggests that "during the war nothing remained truly 'unofficial,'" because "the lines between official and popular propaganda became blurred" (32, 33). I am making the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" here to indicate the insidious nature of the propaganda in these texts: it appeared in editorials, in advertisements, in the weekly columns by the various columnists, in verse, fiction, and song and essentially invaded what would have been a familiar medium for women. I would certainly agree with Gullace, however, when she says, "The distinction between official and unofficial propaganda [...] becomes considerably less important than the question of how those images were used to bolster the war effort" (33).
5. Glenn Stillar, *Analyzing Everyday Texts: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Social Perspectives* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: SAGE, 1998), 195.
6. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, translated by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (1965; New York: Vintage, 1973), vi, 121.
7. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 75.
8. See particularly Ros Ballaster and others, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine*, (Houndsmills, England: Macmillan, 1991); Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800-1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London: Heinemann, 1983); and Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970)
9. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 7.
10. Claire Tylee, "'Maleness Run Riot': The Great War and Women's Resistance to Militarism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 11 no. 3 (1988): 209.
11. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 188.
12. Susan R. Grayzel says that "states as well as individual women tried to maintain an uneasy balance between preserving the home life, which the war was allegedly being fought to defend, and fostering changes in behavior so that women could temporarily join men in sustaining their nations at war," in *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press), 244. That the balance is an "uneasy" one attests to the need for propaganda.
13. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 138.

14. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 148.
15. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (1960; Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1970), 41.
16. *The Family Journal*, Amalgamated Press, Nov. 18, 1916: 6.
17. Kenneth Burke, "Dramatism and Logology," *Communication Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1985): 91; and Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1970), 15.
18. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 115.
19. *The Family Journal*, April 7, 1917: 370.
20. *The Family Journal*, September 11, 1915: 514.
21. *The Family Journal*, December 2, 1916: 41. This quotation was taken from the column "A Special Message to Fathers"; however, *The Family Journal* billed itself as a paper for the entire family and there would be no reason for women not to read this column.
22. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War*, 245.
23. Ballaster et al., *Women's Worlds*, 101.
24. Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: British, American, and Canadian Propaganda and Fiction, 1914-1933* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 89.
25. *The Family Journal*, January 9, 1915: 271.
26. *The Family Journal*, December 8, 1917: 112.
27. *The Family Journal*, June 3, 1916: 120.
28. *The Family Journal*, February 6, 1915: 360.
29. Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 129.
30. *The Family Journal*, December 26, 1914: 225.
31. *The Family Journal*, April 7, 1917: 370. In *Women's Identities at War*, Grayzel discusses the ways in which "motherhood and mothers were used to commemorate the nation's fallen sons" 229. After the war, officially sanctioned, public observance of grief could be controlled and channeled, but during the war private grief had to be cast in the higher terms of patriotism to be validated; the grief felt by mothers had to be portrayed as having a higher patriotic purpose.
32. Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 200.
33. *The Family Journal*, September 5, 1914: 520.
34. *The Family Journal*, April 28, 1917: 7. "Bridget's" imperative is printed in upper case letters in the original. I have reproduced the upper case letters here but not in the title of this paper which contains the entire quotation.
35. Margaret and Patrice Higonnet have used the image of the double helix to describe this phenomenon. "The image of the double helix allows us to see that [...] the actual nature of [...] social activity is not as crucial as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination." "The Double Helix" in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michael, and Margaret Collins Weitz, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 34.
36. *The Family Journal*, October 10, 1914: 660.

37. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver, (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 337.
38. *The Family Journal*, October 31, 1914: iii.
39. *The Family Journal*, April 3, 1915: 580.
40. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers (1972; London: Paladin, 1973), 123.
41. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 126.
42. Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).
43. *The Family Journal*, May 5, 1917: 32.
44. *The Family Journal*, March 16, 1918: 332.
45. Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) notes that even "as late as 1918 it was still possible for some men who had actually fought to sustain the old rhetoric" (23).
46. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.
47. Lynne Layton, "Vera Brittain's Testament(s)" in *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, 78.
48. Jacques Ellul, "The Ethics of Propaganda: Propaganda, Innocence, and Amoralism," translated by D. Raymond Tourville. *Communication* 6 (1981): 169.
49. *The Family Journal*, December 26, 1914: 225

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