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Alexandra Bisio

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## "Yes, Sir, I am Here!": Images of American Women in World War I Propaganda

Alexandra M. Bisio

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Serious, but with a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth, a uniformed woman stands at attention, a stray curl peaking out from under her military cap. In the background another female figure stands in front of a motorcar emblazoned with the insignia of the Motor Corps of America. "Yes, Sir, I am here! Recruits Wanted," the poster's caption reads, imploring American women to do their bit for the 1917 war effort.<sup>1</sup> Another uniformed woman is pasted on the wall next to the stern, if not completely stoic, driver. In a Navy peacoat, her capped curls also caught in a breeze, her eyes heavily lidded and lips parted, a "Christy Girl" stands with her hands in the pockets of her men's naval uniform. "I want you [...] for the Navy," is underlined beckoning men to their local recruiting station to sign up and join the fight "over there."<sup>2</sup> Margaret Mary Fitzgerald saw a poster featuring a woman in 1918. "American Navy," it read, "We need YOU!" Inspired by the image, Fitzgerald enlisted to serve her country as one of the Navy's first female

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Penfield, *Yes Sir – I am Here!*, 1917 in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Chandler Christy, *I want you for the Navy*, 1917 in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002), 24.

yeomen.<sup>3</sup> Images of women in World War I propaganda, ranging from motherly, to alluring, to serious, were meant to shape public opinion and inspire Americans to patriotic acts. They did more than merely shape public opinion of the war, however; they reflected and reinforced changes in American culture already in progress before the war's beginning.

America's commercial illustrators entered the war effort in the midst of what has been arguably deemed the "Golden Age," of American illustration.<sup>4</sup> Advertizing at the turn of the century had become a recognized profession and lucrative trade with the increased circulation of newspapers and, more importantly, magazines. New technology allowed for less complicated and less expensive methods of image reproduction, and illustrators became a key part of the proliferation of mass culture in the form of print media.<sup>5</sup> Illustrated posters had been an extremely popular advertizing media in the 1890s and would become the principal propaganda medium of the First World War.<sup>6</sup> The United States printed more than 20,000,000 copies of 2,500 different war propaganda posters, and many of those posters employed images of women to serve as symbolic icons to sell the war to the nation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lettie Gavin, *American Women in World War I: They Also Served* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Michele H. Bogart, *Advertising, Artists and the Borders of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen Mazur Thomason, *The Origins of Graphic Design in America 1870-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda For War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1996), 251.

<sup>7</sup> Walton Rawls, "Wake Up America!" *American History Illustrated* 23 no. 5 (1998): 35.

To be persuasive, propaganda images must be rooted in the culture of the nation in order to garner the response the government wishes to elicit in its citizenry. There is an element of social change pictured within war posters, especially with regard to gender roles, but also contradiction between traditional and non-traditional elements of American culture. What were women, when viewing these images, internalizing about their own standing in American society? Images of women in American World War I propaganda reveal evidence of changes in the construction of popular gender roles for women in early the twentieth century, as well as cultural gender anxiety. These images also demonstrate an acceptance of women's public visibility, public service, sexuality, and paid employment during times of national crisis. Though contradictory, propaganda images reinforced the necessary abandonment of many lingering nineteenth century prescriptions for women and the official adoption of women's presence in the public sphere.

Many historians of American propaganda begin their study with an examination of the government advertizing agency directed by George Creel, the Committee of Public Information. The Committee of Public Information (CPI) was the first government organized propaganda machine in the United States; it was created under Executive Order 2594, on April 13, 1917, seven days after the official declaration of war.<sup>8</sup> Historians have also, however, emphasized the importance of gender, and changes in gender roles at the turn of the century, when studying the culture of America during the First World War. Peter Gabriel

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<sup>8</sup> Ross, 218.

Filene, in his essay entitled "In the Time of War," emphasizes issues of masculinity and the contemporary perception that the American male had in some way become too "feminine," and that war would provide a "ground where they [American men] could enact and repossess the manliness that modern American society had baffled."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this view may be due, in part, to the fact that more women were entering the public sphere, the exclusive realm of men, through reform work and various professions. As Kathleen Kennedy states in *Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens*, an analysis of the application of wartime disloyalty laws on women peace activists, "to their detractors, disorderly women embodied the social and political chaos that could accompany the entrance of women into the public sphere."<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on motherhood in World War I propaganda certainly demonstrates the lasting emphasis of women's role within the home. The government, however, required the mobilization of women, as well as men, to run the machinery of war in America. The acceptance of this need produced some of the most interesting of World War I imagery.

Michele J. Shover, in her 1975 article, "Roles and Images of Women in World War I Propaganda," contends that the poster art was certainly used to express changes in women's roles in society, but asserts that images of women in this type of propaganda were used to "expand the feminine role to meet the wartime needs

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Gabriel Filene, "In the Time of War," in *The American Man*, ed. by Elizabeth H. and Joseph H. Pleck (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1980), 322.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Kennedy, *Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvi.

of public policy" rather than reflect any change in society as a whole."<sup>11</sup> She continues, "although roles were expanded for women in times of crisis, art associated with propaganda also served to "preserve the traditionally passive feminine role."<sup>12</sup> Once war ended, women were naturally expected to reclaim their traditional roles in the domestic sphere. Martha Banta, in *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History*, makes a similar conclusion. "These women," she states, "were natural heroines, but of the kind intended for return to the regulated life once peace was achieved." She also notes, that "government poster art created a fantasy world where the heroic female image reaches for the timeless and sublime."<sup>13</sup> However, for the first time, publicly active, socially independent women were visually celebrated in government art along side traditional motherhood. It is likely that not all women understood that, once the war ended, American culture was meant to return to pre-war ideals given changes that had already occurred in American society before the war.

### **From True Womanhood to Public Motherhood: The Development of Municipal Motherhood**

Nineteenth century society prescribed an ideal of total domesticity for American women. Sheltered from the public world of male competition, women were told of their position in society as "angels of the home"

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<sup>11</sup> Michele J. Shover, "Roles and Images of Women in World War I Propaganda" *Politics and Society* 5 no. 3 (1975): 469.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 574.

tasked with creating a retreat for their husbands and a loving and well disciplined atmosphere in which to raise their children to be productive citizens.<sup>14</sup> Most women could not attain this ideal version of womanhood prescribed to white middle class women. Still, this all consuming vision of middle-class white womanhood dominated popular culture. As Paula Baker notes, by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century “etiquette manuals written by both men and women prescribed more insistently the proper behavior for middle-class ladies [...] Motherhood was now described as woman’s special calling – a ‘vocation,’ [...] that, if preformed knowledgeably and faithfully, represented the culmination of a woman’s life.”<sup>15</sup> Motherhood became the only acceptable vehicle for women to assert their influence in American society.<sup>16</sup> Middle-class white women by the 1870s would fashion a new definition of motherhood still within their role as keepers and protectors of the domestic sphere; one that allowed them greater autonomy and influence in the public world of men.

Though American women’s rights activists before the 1870s fought to expand women’s political involvement as citizens, women in the progressive reform movements of the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century would expand women’s participation

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<sup>14</sup> Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Paula Baker, “White Women’s ‘Separate Sphere’ and Their Political Role, 1780-1860,” in *Major Problems in American Women’s History third edition*, ed. Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 113.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

within the male sphere of public life through the revised rhetoric of domesticity. Middle-class women, heavily involved in social reform endeavors, argued that their innate domestic qualities made them uniquely suited to solving public problems related to issues of the home, as well as those relating to women and children. Through reform work, it was written in 1891, women learned "to know themselves, to understand the highest duties of motherhood, to feel the sacredness of home life, to see existing wrongs and to apply needed remedies."<sup>17</sup> Though this rhetoric did not free women from patriarchal ideals regarding domestic qualities innate to females, it did allow women to move more freely in the public sphere. These new ideals would also allow women to leave their homes for the battlefields of France to become Red Cross volunteers, some of the "greatest mothers in the world" during the First World War.<sup>18</sup>

Though the United States did not enter the war until its end in 1917, the American Red Cross began to offer its services to all belligerent nations as early as September of 1914.<sup>19</sup> In 1916 the U.S. surgeon general commissioned the Red Cross to establish fifty base hospital units, later to serve as Army and Navy hospitals in the British Isles and on the continent.<sup>20</sup> 20,000 nurses would provide medical care and social relief for

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<sup>17</sup> Kate Tannatt Wood, "What Women's Clubs have Done For Women," *The Chautauquan; A Weekly News Magazine*, August 1891. APS Online.

<sup>18</sup> A.E. Foringer, *The Greatest Mother in the World*, 1917, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*, (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002), 157. See appendix.

<sup>19</sup> Gavin, 180.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 181.



soldiers and European refugees alike.<sup>21</sup> These women took their skills out of the confines of the home and the urban neighborhoods to which progressive reformers had been devoted. Though they applied skills described as befitting a woman's place in society, these women would have their lives, and self-perceptions, altered serving on edges of European battlefields.

### **“The Greatest Mother in the World:” The Art of the American Red Cross**

The poster artists responsible for the creation of advertisements for the Red Cross utilized the recognizable rhetoric of municipal motherhood, firmly established by female progressive reformers, to recruit volunteers and implore American citizens to donate to the international relief organization. This imagery signified an official cultural adoption of women's role as caretaker of the public in addition to her own family. Some historians believe, however, that due to male gender anxieties, “the war effort role for women was thoroughly traditional: service-support-sacrifice. Hence, the war effort constituted a substantial reaffirmation of women's traditional roles.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly, the propaganda of the Red Cross played upon nineteenth-century attributes of women, yet at least in U.S. propaganda, they did so in a way that recognized the changing aspects of popular American womanhood.

### **“The Comforter”**

In an image by propaganda artist Gordon Grant,

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<sup>21</sup> Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 46.

<sup>22</sup> Shover, 473.

entitled *The Comforter*, the Red Cross nurse is put in a classic posture reinforcing her innate qualities as not only a mother, but also as a loving and patient wife.<sup>23</sup> The Red Cross nurse brings the comforts of domesticity to those who have lost those comforts; she is an asexual middle-class wife of those who require one and the mother of motherless children. Grant's image suggests the nurse has found a noble way to apply her innate strengths and skills to those in need. At the same time, this poster sends a message to women who might wish to leave the confines of home to serve their country and help soldiers at the front or the citizens of beleaguered European nations. Any woman had the skills necessary to join the Red Cross, merely by circumstance of her sex and the skills inherent to her gender. Within nineteenth century gender roles, middle-class women were allowed to enter a world which might have been deemed too aggressive and dangerous for their stereotypic delicate natures.

**"Motherless-Fatherless-Starving: How much to save these little lives?"**

More so than *The Comforter*, this image by an unknown propagandist speaks to the American idea of women's public service as municipal motherhood, an ideal that had become more commonplace for middle-class women at the end of the last century.<sup>24</sup> As in *The Comforter*, the Red Cross nurse is once again extend-

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<sup>23</sup> Gordon Grant. *The Comforter*, 1918, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002.), 154. See appendix.

<sup>24</sup> Maureen Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms 1890-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 89.

ing her maternal gifts outside the home. This nurse, appearing at the center of a group of children, is more of a mother of the community rather than simply a surrogate.<sup>25</sup> It is also clear that she is an outside figure come to help a group of unfortunates, not unlike middle-class female reformers in working-class settings. The French woman who so pleadingly offers her child is somehow aware that the Red Cross nurse, because of her official station and perhaps even her American origin, knows how to better care for her child during this time of crisis.

Motherhood, at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, underwent what historians have termed a period of professionalization, “essentially a defensive reaction to the emergence of young women in the late nineteenth century, but it was also a reaction to some major shifts taking place with American society generally.”<sup>26</sup> Though this may have contributed to the emphasis on so-called scientific motherhood, it is more than likely that this trend had more to do with the shift towards a focus on the professional as the knowledgeable authority.<sup>27</sup> The Red Cross nurse is pictured as the middle-class progressive woman who, because of her class status and almost scientific domestic and maternal knowledge, was believed to know how to better care for children. Educated, reform minded women often found “class

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<sup>25</sup> *How Much to Save these Little Lives? The Greatest Mother in the World*, 1917, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*, (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002.), 147. See appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph M. Hawes, “The Strange History of Female Adolescence In the United States,” *The Journal of Psychohistory* 13 (Summer 1985): 54.

<sup>27</sup> Flanagan, 82.

and cultural divides between the middle-class native born and the immigrant working class and the poor always gave the settlement house workers the upper hand in all their dealings."<sup>28</sup> The artist conveys the same sentiment commonly held in American middle-class culture.

Objection to the entrance of women into public sphere, by the First World War, subsided enough that expanding the domain of women into war zones was deemed acceptable enough to be used in propaganda images. In a large scale total war, like World War I, nineteenth century gender conventions no longer served the state in practical ways. Though the entrance of women into public society had caused anxiety among middle-class males, authorities had no choice but to promote the appropriateness of women's entrance into the male sphere. The call to action, cloaked in the mantle of motherhood, made the images of women's power and independence more palatable to those who might have rejected the idea of American mothers on European battlefields. Fundamentally, however, women were shown a choice within the rhetoric of motherhood as to what sort of women they wished to be. They could follow their mothers and be domestic or they could actively engage in a more municipal version of motherhood in service to the nation and the international community. It was not only motherhood, however, that was changed. Ideas about sexuality and the appropriate, public presentation of women's sexuality were also changing as young women gained greater independence from the insular world of family and the domestic sphere.

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<sup>28</sup> Flanagan, 37.

### **Sex and the New Woman: The Visibility of Female Sexuality in the Public Sphere**

The early nineteenth century saw a new construction of middle-class, female gender known as “The Cult of True Womanhood.” The preservation of a woman’s purity was given particular importance in rules governing middle class propriety. A girl was taught, not only by her parents but by popular media as well, to “value her virginity ‘as the ‘pearl’ of great price’ which was her greatest asset.”<sup>29</sup> Courting and interaction with the opposite sex, outside family members, were closely chaperoned. Indeed, “a woman outside the home without a respectable male escort risked ruining her reputation irreparably, for she would immediately be suspected of participating in something immoral or socially marginal.”<sup>30</sup> Anxieties related to middle-class sexuality were aroused as women maneuvered their way into the public sphere. “Women are crowding into the public gaze,” an article published in 1877 in the *New Englander* stated, “and men invite them there, without necessity or special occasion [...] The very atmosphere of the times is changing, and the instinctive sense of delicacy that forms its oxygen so far as female character is concerned, is charged with poison.”<sup>31</sup> By the First World War, however, women’s presence in the public sphere was becoming generally accepted, and even seen as necessary once the United States entered the war. If “True Womanhood” had disappeared, as the author of the *New Englander*

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<sup>29</sup> Cruae, 188.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>31</sup> “Shall Womanhood be Abolished?,” *New Englander*, July 1877. APS Online.

article lamented, what sort of womanhood took its place?

Middle-class women's increased visibility within the public sphere, brought about not only through reform work but also paid employment socially suitable for middle-class women, began to change certain cultural ideals and popular strictures regarding women's social independence. More girls were attending secondary school in the late nineteenth century and especially early twentieth, there girls often "discovered that life could be more than marriage, home, children and family."<sup>32</sup> Attitudes regarding the relative sexual independence of women were changing as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. Some attitudes remained conservative, especially in American courts, when faced with prospect of women's sexual self-assertion.<sup>33</sup> Yet popular culture gave women a different message about sexual expression in the public arena with the creation of the "New Woman" in the 1890s. Visually, young women would be presented with images that typified this popular "New Woman," and gave American women a new figure with which to identify.<sup>34</sup> Dressed in fashions that recall Charles Dana Gibson's famous "Gibson Girl," the "New Woman" was "granted the traits of physical attractive-

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<sup>32</sup> Hawes, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Nancy F. Cott, "The Modern Architecture of Marriage," in *Major Problems in American Women's History* third edition, ed. Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 319.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Dana Gibson, *Scribner's for June*, 1896, in Martha Banta, *Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 89. See Appendix.

ness, independence, strong mindedness, and zest for the experience of the world.”<sup>35</sup> The image of the independent woman was so popular among women at the turn of the century that the image, often meant to be couched in an atmosphere of artistic irony, began to threaten men and women invested in the traditional order of society. For others this image was far from threatening, in fact, the “New Woman,” and her sexuality, would become profitable to those in the early pictorial advertizing industry.

### **I Want You...For the Navy: Women’s Sexuality in Propaganda**

Illustrators at the turn of the twentieth century began to push the boundaries of public propriety in order to make products more competitive on the national market. Images of women, or at least stereotypical “American” white beauties such as the Gibson Girl and the Christy Girl frequently used as icons of the marketing game, would later become propaganda icons as well.<sup>36</sup> These early twentieth century advertisements, though limited as to diversity in their subjects, began to make more free use of women’s sexuality, or at least the suggestion of sexual appeal, in order to sell products and magazines. These advertizing tactics would be easily transferred to images of women in propaganda.

Some of the most overtly sexual images women used in the First World War were employed in enlistment images targeted at men featuring women in male military uniforms, uniquely tailored to emphasize

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<sup>35</sup> Banta, 58

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

feminine figures. Certainly, these images attracted the attention of the young men needed to fight in the war as these posters have been likened to the burlesque posters of the era.<sup>37</sup> Truly, these images do seem to have more in common with later pin up art than anything created by Gibson. Yet, these images would not have been deemed appropriate for mass viewing had there not been some artistic precedent. Anne Classen Knutson, in her dissertation on images of women in World War I propaganda, asserts that these images suggested to men a sexual reward for their service to the nation. "Their sexuality," she writes of these women, "is the sexuality of reward, the sexuality of the boudoir."<sup>38</sup> Men, however, were not the only people viewing these images; women also received messages about their own sexuality, and the display of that sexuality, through these images.

### **"I summon you to Comradeship in the Red Cross"**

Though Red Cross images usually played upon the rhetoric of sainted or public motherhood in order to persuade their viewers to support their volunteer organization, an image by illustrator Harrison Fisher entitled *I summon you to comradeship in the Red Cross* does not utilize this common strategy.<sup>39</sup> Just like the nurses pictured in war ravaged Europe, the woman in Fisher's image stands in the foreground dressed in a

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<sup>37</sup> Banta, 572.

<sup>38</sup> Anne Classen Knutson, "Breasts, Brawn and the Selling of a War: American World War I Propaganda Posters 1917-1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1997), 166.

<sup>39</sup> Harrison Fisher, *I summon you to comradeship in the Red Cross*, 1917, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002.), 150. See appendix.



white uniform signifying her membership in the Red Cross. She is certainly not, however, the surrogate mother of other Red Cross images; rather she strikes a pose closer to that of a music hall girl than a dutiful nurse.

Indeed, according to Banta, the use of the music hall and burlesque image was somewhat common in the more noticeably sexual propaganda posters of World War I.<sup>40</sup> For men, this image of a sexual Red Cross nurse, a traditionally middle class figure, resembled a more familiar lower class, and therefore more sexually available and less culturally threatening, female image. However, this suggests that these images only fell under traditional male gaze. Propaganda images were, however, exposed to the general public. The use of this sort of female figure in a poster created for the Red Cross is surprising; unlike other organizations that used this kind sexual imagery, the American Red Cross was a predominantly female organization. The connection of a middle-class figure with visible sexuality might have suggested to female viewers a greater acceptance of their own sexuality.

**“Gee! I wish I were a man! I’d join the Navy!”**

One of the most famous propaganda images from the First World War was a Navy enlistment poster by illustrator Howard Chandler Christy entitled *Gee, I wish I were a man! I’d join the Navy!* Banta uses this image as a primary example of what she describes as the popular image of “Columbian Amazons” in military uniform commonly seen on the burlesque circuit. “Howard Chandler Christy’s famous poster for the U.S.

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<sup>40</sup> Banta, 572

Navy," Banta explains, "is close in its tone to the burlesque poster [...] and to the cover for the 1919 Ziegfeld Follies, 'My Baby's Arms.'"<sup>41</sup> The image that Christy presents is interesting as an example of a wide, public display of what could have been considered a rather risqué image. The text that accompanies the image, however, reveals much about public reactions to changes in gender during the First World War.

Around the turn of the century, many believed that society was in some way becoming "feminized." Opportunities for the expression of masculinity were disappearing as education and labor became less male dominated and its expression less physically demanding.<sup>42</sup> The war and participation in the armed forces, as Filene explains, came to be seen as a chance for American boys to prove their manhood. "Americans entered the Great War," Filene explains, "to achieve not simply political principles, but psychological reassurance as well. [...] Indeed, the incessant propaganda that filled newspapers, magazines, auditoriums, and street corners focused primarily on those who were not in uniform."<sup>43</sup> The Christy sailor's gentle taunt, "Gee! I wish I were *a man*," on a poster designed for enlistment, can be interpreted as a slight on the masculinity of those who did not enter the armed

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<sup>41</sup> Banta, 573. See appendix.

<sup>42</sup> Jeffery P. Hantover, "The Boy Scouts and the Validation of Masculinity," in *The American Man*, ed. Elizabeth H. and Joseph H. Pleck (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1980), 291.

<sup>43</sup> Filene, 323.

forces.<sup>44</sup> However, this image can easily have another meaning tied to women's entrance into traditionally male dominated sectors of society. Dawn Schmitz asserts that images of sexualized women in cigarette ads often parodied images and popular trends associated with the New Woman. "The New Woman," Schmitz writes of an 1888 cigarette ad, "signaling [...] sexual independence, is called up only to be mockingly dismissed. [...] The threat to masculinity posed by the New Woman- who demanded entrance into spheres of work, education and recreation that had previously served to define manhood- is blunted."<sup>45</sup> This phenomenon can also be seen in Christy's propaganda images. Women had, in fact, begun entering the U.S. Navy as yeomen in early 1917.<sup>46</sup> Christy's image can be seen, perhaps, as a lashing out at the more than 11,000 women who had joined the Navy, thereby violating the male sphere.<sup>47</sup> By portraying his sailor girl in such a manner, it could be said that Christy was serving to mock the steps towards female independence taken by these early naval women.

In the decades before the turn of the century, sexuality in advertizing, both as a way to simply sell products and to subtly mock women's sexual inde-

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<sup>44</sup> Erika A. Kuhlman, *Petticoats and White Feathers: Gender Conformity, Race, the Progressive Peace Movement, and the Debate over War, 1895-1919*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Dawn Schmitz, "Only Flossy, High-Society Dudes Would Smoke 'Em: Gender and Cigarette Advertising in the Nineteenth Century," in *Turning the Century: Essays in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Carol A. Stabile (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 112.

<sup>46</sup> Gavin, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

pendence became an even more evident trend. The necessity of women's independence in the public sphere became apparent during the First World War, as did the understanding that the new sexuality of women could be used to sell the war just as it had sold products. Where images of the New Woman's sexuality might have before been limited to a male audience, propaganda images were meant for a general audience, including women. Middle-class women were given a different reflection of themselves in these suggestive images. With unintentional support from the government, American women began to develop new perceptions of their own sexuality.

**"When men go a-warring, women go to work:"  
American Women and Visibility of Labor**

Since the beginning of American industrial production in the early nineteenth century, women had been a prime source of low wage, unskilled labor. Women did tedious and grueling work in factories, work that they would be publicly praised for during the First World War. Opportunities for greater independence grew as more jobs began to appear. Between the years 1880 and 1900 the number of employed women doubled. During the next decade it increased by another 50 percent. Most non-college educated women, however, joined the labor force out of necessity rather than as a "glorious adventure."<sup>48</sup> Though clearly women's paid work had been a large part of the American workforce before the First World War, it was during the war that women's work was given new positive attention.

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Gabriel Filene, *Him/Her/Self*, 33.

Harriot Stanton Blatch commented upon this phenomenon, "America is witnessing the beginnings of a great industrial and social change. [...] They have opened up every line of service. There is not an occupation in which a woman is not found."<sup>49</sup> Many of these occupations were publicly visible in comparison to the work women had done traditionally. Blatch spoke of highly visible uniformed women trolley conductors and elevator operators, and while she seems to deem their presence as hopefully lasting yet somewhat quaint, Americans were exposed to the sight of women in non-traditional occupations.<sup>50</sup> The flurry of propaganda posters illustrating women's place in war industry were produced supporting their visibility.

### **"Remember the Girl behind the Man behind the Gun:" The Y.W.C.A. and Images of War Work**

Though not a government organization, a large amount of propaganda related to women's work was produced by the Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.). Most popularly the organization was known for giving young women inexpensive rooms when away from their family homes and hot meals when in need.<sup>51</sup> As the United States entered the war, however, many tenets of the organization had changed as organization leaders were forced to conform to the growing needs of the female workforce. The Y.W.C.A. found that it needed to respond to "the practical needs of working women who turned to the Y.W.C.A. for assistance in

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<sup>49</sup> Blatch, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Janice Dilg, "Uncovering "The Real Work" of the Portland YWCA, 1900-1923," *The Journal of Women's History* 15 (Autumn 2003):175.

addressing the stark financial realities and bleak industrial conditions they confronted at their work places." Set in a tone of patriotism, the Y.W.C.A. actively educated women participate in war work; a task to which the Y.W.C.A. was "well fitted to wrestle, as they have had an industrial department for a number of years" prior to the United States' entry into the war.<sup>52</sup> Certainly, propagandists for the Y.W.C.A. played on the idea of patriotic, sisterly service to the nation to convince women to join the American war effort both on the home front and abroad. Even before U.S. entrance into the war the organization had openly encouraged women's work and its expansion. The propaganda of the Y.W.C.A. was some of the most visually supportive of women's work and often embodied the ideals of the organization.

### **"For Every Fighter a Woman Worker"**

Ernest Hamlin Baker's Y.W.C.A. propaganda for the United War Work Campaign features a veritable sea of women marching united as a great army. These women were always pictured as confident in their work, more than able to do the tasks that the nation required of them.<sup>53</sup> "For Every Fighter a Woman Worker," the caption reads, "Back our Second Line of Defense."<sup>54</sup> Like many Y.W.C.A. propaganda pieces, this piece seems to be focused on supporting "the line of defense" than the enlistment of women to their

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<sup>52</sup> Ida Clyde Clarke, *American Women and the World War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 194.

<sup>53</sup> Shover, 478.

<sup>54</sup> Ernest Hamlin Baker, *For Every Fighter A Woman Worker*, 1918, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002.), 167. See appendix.

ranks. More than anything, propaganda of this type attempted to convince the American public to support their fighting men by doing what the Y.W.C.A. had been actively doing since the turn of the century, supporting working women and the expansion of their employment. The work that the Y.W.C.A. had done in order to support women in industry and other forms of paid work had, at least for the duration of the war, been formally adopted by American culture and propaganda images like Baker's clearly reflected that point.

Not every Y.W.C.A. image explicitly supported the continuation of women's expanded work during the war. Some had a slightly more domestic undertone, although that was not inconsistent with the more traditional, Christian tenets of the Y.W.C.A. Most Y.W.C.A. images, however, urged the American public to support the woman worker, and to "care for her through the Y.W.C.A."<sup>55</sup> Women were given a positive image of their call to work, and the feeling that their work would be supported. Whether or not that support would last after the war had ended was another question, but these images were not likely to be ones that women would soon forget.

## Conclusion

In America at the turn of the twentieth century women began to see themselves popularly depicted in new ways. Deviating from the nineteenth-century

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<sup>55</sup> Adolph Triedler, *For Every Fighter A Woman Worker*, 1918, in Gary A. Borkan, *World War I Posters*. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2002.), 166. See appendix.

image of the passive female, women began to be portrayed as more active. Advertising agencies were drawn to this vivacious New Woman and gave her a new occupation as an effective saleswoman in magazine and poster ads. The First World War brought changes in women's roles, especially public roles, to the forefront of public life in America. Gender roles had already begun to change long before the war, but social upheaval radically challenged American perceptions of gender. During a time of crisis, like this "Great War," women's skills both domestic and occupational and her presence and visibility, within the public sphere was required.

Pictorial propagandists set to work making images to mobilize not only American men, but also women to support the war. With their well honed advertizing skills, these artists borrowed from progressives and suffragettes and turned this publicly minded, angel of public domesticity, into the model of municipal motherhood. Elements of female sexuality inspired by women's increasing visibility in the public sphere were borrowed to convince citizens to support the war. Finally, in addition to mobilizing women on the home front, propaganda posters urged the public to respect and support working women.

Non-traditional elements of gender were sometimes paired with, or set against, more common nineteenth-century notions of women's role in public society. Propaganda images were contradictory in nature, both supporting and subverting women's new public roles. The inconsistent nature of propaganda imagery speaks to the medium's tendency to give multiple, meanings depending upon the viewer of the depictions of women. Propaganda artists struggled to retain the conservative



nineteenth-century views of women in their art. These views, however, were in opposition to the needs of the state during the war. The more non-traditional images had to be shown to support the roles the government required women to fill during the war. The new self perceptions women gained during the war could not simply be forgotten. Even women who were not actively involved in the war effort saw these images of publicly minded mothers, sexually aware women, and working women and were informed, in a way, about their own changing cultural identity as American women.

*Alexandra Bisio is a senior American History major with a special interest in women's and gender history. She currently works at the Orradre Library in Archives and Special collections and will be pursuing a Master's degree in Library and Information Science at Simmons College beginning next fall.*