

ODYSSEUS'S UNEASE: THE POST-WAR CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN MELVYN BRAGG'S *THE SOLDIER'S RETURN* AND *A SON OF WAR*¹

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Abstract: Melvyn Bragg's autobiographical novels *The Soldier's Return* (1999) and *A Son of War* (2001) narrate the return home of a working-class English WWII veteran mainly from the point of view of his son Joe (Bragg's *alter ego*). By reading this new Odysseus' return in the light of the analysis of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity carried out in Men's Studies, this article shows that the experience of the veteran's return to peace is central for the re-articulation not only of his individuality as a man but also for the continuation of the patriarchal model in Western societies, even at the expense of class loyalties and, indeed, at the expense of women's liberation.

Keywords: Masculinity, patriarchy, fatherhood, hegemony, social class.

Resumen: Las novelas autobiográficas de Melvyn Bragg *The Soldier's Return* (1999) y *A Son of War* (2001) narran el regreso al hogar de un veterano inglés de clase obrera tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, principalmente desde el punto de vista de su hijo Joe (*alter ego* de Bragg). Gracias a la lectura del regreso de este nuevo Ulises, iluminada por el análisis de la masculinidad hegemónica patriarcal realizado por los Estudios de la Masculinidad, este artículo demuestra que la experiencia del retorno del veterano a la paz es crucial no sólo para la regeneración de su individualidad como hombre sino también para la continuidad del modelo patriarcal en Occidente, a costa incluso de lealtades de clase y, sin duda, de la liberación de la mujer.

Palabras clave: Masculinidad, patriarcado, paternidad, hegemonía, clase social.

The first, most important narrative text to deal with the theme of the soldier's return home is, of course, Homer's *Odyssey*. Once Odysseus reaches the shores of his beloved Ithaca after an absence of twenty years, the plot focuses on his struggles to regain his place as head of his own patriarchal household against the threat of usurpation posed by Penelope's suitors. Odysseus passes brilliantly this final test of manhood and soon claims back his authority as husband, father and master. Family life is apparently resumed without a qualm in Ithaca's royal palace. Quite different is the approach to a similar family reunion portrayed in Melvyn Bragg's novel *The Soldier's Return* (1999) and its sequel *A Son of War* (2001). In these candid, well-crafted volumes Bragg narrates the last part of the modern odyssey of English World War II veteran Sam Richardson, focusing on his difficulties to adjust back to civilian life after being stationed for four years in Burma. This Odysseus's

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new unease arises in Bragg's work from the conditions under which Sam must live his masculinity after his return, which are quite different from those of the patriarchal Greek hero. Sam cannot be the same man he was before the war, nor can he fully become a new, well-adjusted man without disburdening himself of the mental anguish caused by his war experience. The test of manhood that Sam faces involves a painful adaptation to domestic life complicated not so much by his wife Ellen's suitors (there's no other rival in sight) as by her excluding intimacy with the couple's son, six-year-old Joe (Bragg's *alter ego*), a bond that mother and son have built to make up for Sam's absence.

I wish to consider here how these two novels reflect the mechanisms by which hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, an aspect closely connected to the veteran's return home, as I will show. The question of hegemonic masculinity underlies *The Soldier's Return* and *A Son of War* since Bragg's storyline documents, whether the author intended it or not, how fatherhood guarantees the prevalence of patriarchal masculinity, that is to say, of the dominant or hegemonic model. Sam's small hometown, Wigton in Cumbria (Bragg's own birthplace and an habitual location in his novels) can offer him nothing but dreary factory jobs and little sympathy for his plea as a veteran; family life seems also to exclude him. In the first novel, Bragg leads the triangle formed by Sam, Ellen and Joe to a point of crisis which threatens to dissolve the family unit when Sam decides to migrate to Australia alone. At the last possible minute Sam gets off the train but this apparent happy end actually strikes a new patriarchal balance by which Ellen is relegated to a subservient position, back into her role as obedient wife and mother.

Sam's slow realisation of the need to negotiate his new post-war identity in view of Ellen's and Joe's resistance to his rule gives way, thus, in the second novel to the sudden restoration of his lost authority as a family man and as a member of his community. This is achieved when Ellen realises that Sam has stayed for Joe's sake rather than for her own. By choosing to fulfil his responsibilities as a father, Sam claims a patriarchal authority that Ellen cannot deny since he, after all, has proved his good qualities as a man by deciding to stand by his family. By staying Sam wins a first important battle which allows him to control Joe's upbringing and to curtail the autonomy gained by Ellen during the war. Bragg clearly endorses Sam's attitude and although he sympathises with Ellen's suffering at the gradual loss of control over her own life after Sam's 'second' return, this is never contested.

In a sense, the basic plot line of the two novels is the story of how Sam promises himself to do for his son what his father didn't do for him. The child Sam had a chance to leave the slum where he was born thanks to winning a scholarship to attend grammar school. His father, an embittered WWI veteran, spoiled this opportunity by claiming (falsely, it is hinted) that the family could spare no money for uniforms and extras. It is implied that somehow the father's jealousy of the son's chance for a better future prevented Sam from having a different life. This is why he decides to provide Joe with an education that allows the boy to choose his future, which also means that Joe stands the chance to break away from his working-class environment.

While Ellen seems satisfied with her limited education, Sam is made aware of his shortcomings in the army, when he meets educated men and realises that "He had been imprisoned in ignorance. He had not known, until he met these men, how much he had missed" (Bragg 1999: 44). The army becomes a new school for him but serving abroad can't

make up for his lack of employable skills, which condemns him to factory work, when in fact Sam yearns to be a teacher. Significantly, the final chapters of *A Son of War* deal with Sam's efforts to convince his teenage son Joe to reject the allure of quick employment and easy money in the 1950s affluent society and to go on studying. Taking into account the autobiographical content of the novels and Bragg's privileged position within the British media and cultural establishment, it is safe to say that Sam's efforts pay as regards Joe, something confirmed besides by the last volume so far of Bragg's saga (*Crossing the Lines*, 2003). It is also quite safe to say that middle-class, educated Bragg is quite aware of the class issues involved in Sam's decision not to be like his own father for they result in Joe's increased social mobility through education.

I'll turn next to an examination of Sam's relationship with Joe in the light of the theoretical discussion of hegemonic masculinity developed by R.W. Connell, one of the founding parents of Men's Studies. In the late 1970s Connell started attacking the prevailing 1950s sex-role theory. This was based on an essentialist view by which it was supposed that men and women perform fixed roles in society according to normative models of behaviour and to the biological imperatives associated to each gender. In his best-known book, *Gender and Power*, Connell objected that femininity and masculinity are "historically mutable" (1987: 63) and argued that "multiple femininities and masculinities are ... a central fact about gender and the way its structures are lived" (63). Borrowing Antonio Gramsci's theories of social change and his idea that societies change because the leading hegemonic groups convince the dominated to accept their ideology by consent rather than by force, Connell proposed the concept of hegemonic masculinity to explain how patriarchy stays in power. For him it is quite clear that hegemonic masculinity has to make a continued effort to "sustain the social definition of gender ... precisely *because the biological logic*, and the inert practice that responds to it, *cannot sustain the gender categories.*" (1987: 81; original emphasis). Change occurs constantly and is always "produced by human agency" (83) in specific historical settings. Connell maintains, therefore, that:

Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities. These other masculinities need not be as clearly defined –indeed, achieving hegemony may consist precisely in preventing alternatives gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives, confining them to ghettos, to privacy, to unconsciousness. (1987: 186)

Anticipating Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Connell rejected the idea of normative sex-role and replaced it with the concept of standard behaviour, speaking of masculinity as something conferred on the male body by sanctioned social practices. Connell also examined the institutions and the bonds that guarantee the continuity of hegemonic masculinity, specifically the labour market, the state and the family, somewhat neglecting culture. The hegemonic ideal, obviously, is also publicised through cultural manifestations, one of the points I am making here in relation to Bragg's novels.

Connell believes that there can be little dialogue between and within hegemonic and subordinate positions. He also seemingly disregards the resistance to power from these subordinate positions. Critics like Robert Hanke note, accordingly, that:

Apparent modifications of hegemonic masculinity may represent some shift in the cultural meanings of masculinity without an accompanying shift in dominant social structural arrangements, thereby recuperating patriarchal ideology by making it more adaptable to contemporary social conditions and more able to accommodate counter-hegemonic forces, such as liberal-feminist ideology and gay/lesbian politics. (1992: 197)

This is why feminist critics see the crises that result in distinct changes in hegemonic masculinity with caution, to say the least. They are divided between those who, like Lynn Segal (1990), complain that masculinity is changing too slowly towards less patriarchal positions and those who, like Abigail Solomon-Godeau, argue that masculinity lives, like capitalism, in a permanent state of crisis so that “like the phoenix –an appropriately phallic simile– it continually rises again, retooled and reconstructed for its next historical turn” (1997: 39). On the other hand, male critics of Connell’s ideas note that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is too focused on intergender power relations, neglecting the strategies by which elements from subordinate models are assimilated. Demetriakis Z. Demetriou, for instance, argues that current hegemonic masculinity has incorporated aspects of apparently subordinated masculinities, such as the pleasure in consumption derived from diverse gay models, because “it is its constant hybridisation, its constant appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc dynamic and flexible” (2001: 348). Despite Demetriou’s celebration of the flexibility of hegemonic masculinity, hybridisation is what keeps patriarchal masculinity (the current hegemonic model) in power, making it almost impossible to dismantle. Its assumption of certain aspects of the subordinate gender models is a strategy for survival, by no means a policy for deep change.

In Connell’s scheme of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities, working-class men are subordinated to the interests of hegemonic masculinity, which is, by definition, middle class, since this is the class that rules most institutions of the current public patriarchy. Private patriarchal power has an even distribution, yet as Jeff Hearn clarifies:

Public patriarchy must be understood as combining elements of both (private) patriarchy and fratirarchy. The general corporate form of public patriarchy may be fratirarchal (rule by brotherhoods), while specific organisational processes may be patriarchal, in terms of hierarchical domination. Alternatively, public patriarchy could be understood as characterised by public domain processes that are simultaneously patriarchal (hierarchical domination by men) and fratirarchal (collective domination by men). (1992: 67)

Connell actually sees working-class men’s masculinity as a model complicit with hegemonic masculinity, that is to say, as a fervent contributor to the prevalence of the middle-class patriarchal model of hierarchical domination. As Andrew Tolson explained in *The Limits of Masculinity* (1977) under early 19th century industrial capitalism the separation of the spheres of work and home complicated the emotional economy of middle-class and working-class men by making them quite invisible for their own children, who were left

at home or at school mostly in women's hands. The father's participation in modern war since the same historical period has furthered this absence (as is plainly seen in Bragg's novels) and stresses men's loyalty to the patriarchy that Hearn describes, with no widespread resistance to its hierarchical domination until the late 20th century.

Even though he refers to the impact of World War II on the society of the United States, Stephen Cohan's thesis that "the institutions of war-time laid the groundwork for the eventual absorption of working-class men into a middle-class outlook" (1997: xiv) makes also sense for the United Kingdom. The difference between WWII and previous wars is that when they returned all working men, whether low or middle-class, were given a similar task as heads of the family *and* providers of the new comforts of 1950s consumerism, a point to which I will return later. Sam's contribution to the education and the future of his son must be thus read not only as a gesture of affection between father and son, but as an example of the abandonment of working-class patriarchal values in favour of middle-class ones: the worker no longer wants his son to be a worker like himself, unlike what his own father wanted, but to transcend class limitations through education; this is available to the working classes precisely as a way to compensate for their sacrifices in war in favour of hierarchical patriarchy.

Sam's struggle with his own father shows, however, that the production or re-production of masculinity is not automatic: "Fathers present ambiguous, contradictory models to which sons responds in a variety of ways. Over time, they gain new perspectives on their father's lives. Their long-run reactions grow out of a series of personal experiences and lessons that make fathers' teachings increasingly less determinate" (Gerson 1993: 48). One important point that Bragg raises is that, unlike what might be supposed within patriarchal masculinity, combat experience does not help father and sons relate. The experience of combat was at the time of WWII part of the make-up of hegemonic masculinity –a proper man was supposed to be a keen warrior– but its effects were so traumatic in many cases that combat left a gap in many men's understanding of their own masculinity, something which had already happened in any case in WWI. In fact, the silence of the WWI veteran is what allowed for the reproduction of practically the same chain of experience, trauma and silence in the lives of their sons. Because Sam's ill-tempered father is a WWI veteran Sam entertains for a while a wild hope that his own war experience will finally bring them together:

There was so much he wanted to ask this man. He felt dizzy with a rush of questions he had rehearsed so often in Burma. Good questions about his experiences in the First War –to discuss war together, to be on common footing for once and with something to say to each other. He had thought that would bring them together but even at their first meeting soon after his return, his father had not wanted to talk about it. (Bragg 1999: 156)

This hope is soon dashed. The father's impenetrable silence about the Great War is so unyielding that it also prevents the son from asking other crucial questions: why no money was found for the scholarship, why Sam his mother were so often the target of the father's violence. These "unanswerable questions" finally bring Sam to ask himself the key question: "how do I, Sam, avoid ending up imprisoned like you, my father, like this?" (1999: 157). Interestingly, the reader, though not Sam, learns about the real reason for the father's

distance through a moment of intimacy in *A Son of War* between Sam's elder sister, Ruth, and Ellen. Ruth tells her sister-in-law that their father was always hardest on Sam:

“Because, I think, Sam was the only one Dad could take it out on after he came from the war,” said Ruth. “Sam would be about five. Then all of us coming in a rush and mam never well. When I got old enough to see, it would break my heart. Sam idolised him. He was desperate. He tried so hard to please Father. But nothing he could do was right.” (2001: 291)

The solidarity among men outside the family is also quite flimsy, according to *The Soldier's Return*, possibly because while women usually sympathise with each other's complaints against life's unfairness men make a point of not complaining rather than risk being taken for effeminate, weak (i.e. subordinate) men. Sam can't bring himself to discuss his painful war experience with Ellen because it is too much for words; talking to other men is not, however, easier, since “You just did not talk about it, except privately and rarely with those who had been through it with you. And never to admit pain” (Bragg 1999: 63). The same applies to his rights as a serviceman: “he did not want to be of that party of ex-servicemen who complained –about lack of housing and job promises broken, of lack of recognition or funds, of the apparent preferment given those who had stayed behind and the sense of wasted time.” (1999: 150) These men greet Sam “unexcitedly– most of them remarking on how well he looked, as if he had come back from a holiday” (*Return* 18). Dishonest men like Sam's employer take advantage of this silent endurance, easily backing out of promises made to keep jobs for the time when the war would be over.

Ironically, this experience Sam is forced to silence is one of the most rewarding in his life both as a man and as a worker. Employed doing shift work at a paper factory after his return, Sam feels that “His work brought home the bacon but it was repetitive and tiring.... He felt a fuller man in uniform” (150). In combat he was as in work just a cog in a large machinery, “Yet this straitjacket had liberated energies inside his mind...” (255), and granted him an inexplicable sense of freedom that he loses back home. , it must be noted, volunteered, which surely means he enlisted out of a sense of duty directly linked to his sense of masculinity and his equally patriarchal patriotism. To Leonard, Ellen's uncle and foster father (and Sam's alternative father figure) he explains that “It was what I could do better than anything I'd done before and however much we all carped on and moaned, it was worth it, especially when you saw what I saw, what the Japs did, when you saw that....” (153). The admiring Leonard pointedly notes “there'll be nothing as exciting, again, I expect, will there?” and Sam realises “maybe that was the real point” (154).

For a while after his return, Sam's duties towards his men in Burma weight more than his duties towards his wife and son, which is why Sam thinks that the solution to his unease is tightening the ties with his former brothers in arms, making thus fratriarchy his priority. When Sam, transformed into a rather successful pub landlord, is visited by his regiment's colonel in *A Son of War*, about five or six years after his return, they comment on the dispersal of the former comrades and Sam clearly hints that these ties are better severed and war forgotten. In the first novel, though, Sam's love seems to be all for the men he led in the Burma fields, rather than for his family: “It seemed strange but in the distant marooned

battlefields of Burma, he had opened his heart and mind more than in any other place at any other time of his life” (Bragg 1999: 152). One man, Ian, who dies in an absurd accident, becomes for Sam the embodiment of all that feeling of love. Yet, the sad fate of another local veteran, Jackie, helps Sam make up his mind to leave Ian’s memory behind. Jackie is sent to the regional psychiatric hospital as he is unable to overcome the then unacknowledged post-traumatic stress syndrome. When in *A Son of War* Jackie escapes to become a beggar, Sam finally realises that his feelings must be for his own family, not for his comrades.

The problem is that while his feelings for his comrades are based on their equality as brotherly men, Sam’s feelings for his family are based on his patriarchal authority over wife and son, an authority that his absence has considerably weakened. In his review of *The Soldier’s Return*, Allan Sillitoe notes that “There is real history behind it too: many couples split up after the Second World War because they found themselves utterly incompatible” (1999). Many women simply had to face on their own the hardships of the home front while their husbands fought in the front, a situation that undermined the conventional presentation of man as protector and provider. As an unhappy married couple, therefore, Sam and Ellen enact a drama that surely must have been quite common in many English homes but that has so far had limited expression in fiction. Their pre-war love was about “Tender courting, the power of physical love. Secret places they had found on their walks. Dances galore. Private jokes. Bicycle rides. Silly quarrels” (Bragg 1999: 245). Their post-war war is about fear, lack of communication and the threat of violence brought on by Ellen’s resistance to accepting again Sam’s authority and his anger at her new autonomy.

Only when Mr. Kneale, a retired history teacher who lodges with Ellen’s aunt, tells Ellen that Sam must have gone through an awful experience does she realise that she’s not sympathetic enough; Ellen believes she is, in fact, too engrossed by her own need for independence to notice how deeply Sam is hurt. Lacking our modern vocabulary, peppered with terms like battle fatigue and post-traumatic stress syndrome, Ellen can’t understand what has changed Sam. When she offers to listen to his experiences, Sam feels insulted because in his view a man must not tell anyone about war, much less his wife. Ellen is puzzled by his gruff rebuttal because as she tells a friend, “I thought I knew everything about him before he went away. He used to say I could read his mind” (1999: 194). It is important to note, though, that Ellen takes a long time to find a friend to confide in, out of a sense of loyalty towards Sam, something that suggests that women were as isolated as men when it came to discussing the specific difficulties they went through after their husbands’ return home.

In an article that deals with working women’s compulsory return home in Britain after the war, Julia Swindells explains how homemaking played a crucial role in the parallel homecoming of soldier and wife. Swindells examines in particular an aspect that is a good example of how the institutions of public patriarchy work in practice. She comments on a parliamentary debate which took place in 1944, entitled in *Hansard* “Man-Power (Release from Forces),” and introduced by Lieutenant-Colonel Profumo. One of the participants, a Major Nield, points out in his discussion of how to reward men and women after the war that the old saying ‘men must work and women must weep’ is no longer valid, for “Those women have waited but they have worked, and have not wept...” (1995: 225). Swindells notes that even though there was a clear acknowledgement of women’s contribution to the war effort and a clear awareness of a new balance in the relationship between the genders,

the idea of 'home' to which men and women should return was the traditional nuclear family based on patriarchal values. This was defended in and by Parliament on the grounds that, in Swindells's words, "whatever the shared experience of women and men in wartime, the returning male soldier will be reclaimed and acclaimed for traditional masculinity. *His* wartime experience will not have changed that..." (227). The anxiety about the unmanning experience abroad was counteracted with the idea that manliness would once more flourish in English homes, with women and children helping the returned warrior enjoy life again. As Swindells clarifies, the problem of why women should be attracted to this particular idea of homecoming is solved by "reconstructing woman as subject of fashion, as consumer, seeking 'the new look'" (228). Man was redefined, as I have already noted, as provider of the money needed for his family to enjoy the new pleasures of consumerism.

In Sam and Ellen's case, homecoming and homemaking are indeed profoundly interrelated but not in the sense the honourable MPs supposed. Sam's return prompts a private war fought by the couple on two grounds: housing and their child's education. Ellen fits only very modestly the image of the consumerist post-war woman, but she thinks that the regeneration of family life depends on her being given the chance to choose a new home in and through which she can express her identity as a wife and mother. During Sam's long absence, Ellen and Joe live with her aunt and uncle; after Sam's return, he demands a place of their own, something that soon becomes a source of disagreement with Ellen, whose hopes are set on a council house in a quiet neighbourhood. In *The Soldier's Return* a reluctant Ellen accepts Sam's choice of a small house in a rough neighbourhood as a lesser evil since Sam even considers taking his family back to the appalling slum where he was born. Not satisfied with this concession, Sam tries to convince Ellen next that they should start a new life in Australia. Her firm resistance against this risky plan marks a crucial turning point in her relationship with Sam.

As mentioned, Ellen loses her capacity to resist Sam's patriarchal rule when he abandons at the last minute his plans to migrate to Australia at the end of *The Soldier's Return*. These plans, which Ellen sees as pure selfishness, take shape when Sam's comrade Alex Metcalfe, a school teacher, proposes to Sam that they migrate. Sam decides to travel first and have Ellen and Joe follow once he's settled down. Ellen's resistance to this unexpected uprooting, though, is so fierce that Sam chooses to go alone; Alex, understanding the situation better than Sam himself, pushes him off the train before it even starts moving. Sam dreams of Australia to counteract his war-related nightmares, thinking that "The sight of those bodies would not follow him there" (Bragg 1999: 276) and expecting manly Australia to be somehow as liberating as the army. This feeling is based on the impression that the Australian soldiers made on Sam and Alex in Burma. In Sam's words "There was something about them ... I think it was that they felt they had a real stake. The sky was the limit. It was their place. It was a new place and they were going to stuck into it and nothing would stop them" (1999: 262). Alex wants to rush away as soon as possible so as not to quash the "Australian in myself by thinking" (262). Tellingly, not a single word is used to comment on Australian women, as if they were not part of the land. The first letter from Alex, which presents him working hard in a rather dismal environment, convinces Sam that he has made the right choice by staying; Alex's comments on the negative imperialist reputation of the English among the Australians give the final blow to Sam's fantasies of

remaking himself as an Australian man. Sam, in short, decides he'd rather be an *English* man at home than an English *man* abroad.

In *A Son of War*, once the family are finally settling down in Ellen's long-wished-for new council house, Sam dashes her hopes for cosy domesticity by forcing her to move to the pub he leases. Ellen doesn't really have a say in the matter of where and how they are to live and though Bragg seems to sympathise with her, there is no real critique of Sam's tyranny. The move to the pub is the clearest sign of Sam's regained authority. It is painfully clear to Ellen that she must accept becoming a landlady against her wishes as a way of owning up to Sam for having stayed. By forcing her to be a working woman at his convenience, Sam exploits Ellen in the same ways that he criticises in her former employers. When Sam returns he finds Ellen employed as a cleaning lady and shop assistant at the chemist's, modest jobs that she only gives up when her husband forces her to quit. Sam dislikes her working at the chemist's because she is exposed to the public's gaze (implicitly male) but he himself does not hesitate to use Ellen's prettiness and charm in the pub to lure male customers.

The main focus of Bragg's two novels, though, is not really the relationship between Sam and Ellen but the family triangle. Realising that she must eventually accept Sam's renewed patriarchal rule, Ellen seeks next to resist his authority by intervening in the education of their son in order to prevent Joe from adopting the worst features of the men around, above all their aggressive behaviour. Sam's homecoming triggers a distinctive oedipal scenario in Joe's life. The father forces the child to break away from the mother by disparaging everything Ellen stands for and by imposing on Joe the model of masculinity that she abhors. He rejects Ellen's soft, effeminate, inadequate boy and tries hard to replace him with Sam's tough, masculine, proper lad. "Socialisation can be seen," Arthur Brittan writes "... as the process whereby children acquire an ideology which naturalises gender" (1989: 45). This is why Sam and Ellen fight bitterly over their right to channel their son's socialisation in a direction that reproduces or rejects, respectively, Sam's masculinity.

Even though they seem to be at odds as to what they want for Joe –he teaches him to box, she takes him to piano lessons– in the end they discover they were in agreement all the time. Sam comes to the conclusion that he is projecting on his son's future the hopes he had for himself and so he can only agree when in *A Son of War* Ellen comments:

I never wanted to lassify him as you said once. I wanted him to have one or two things I didn't have, that's all. I didn't want to push him either. It would take or it wouldn't. But I wanted him to see something else, Sam. It was declared like a plea. That we didn't have. Just to see something else, that's all. There's nothing wrong with that, is there? (2001: 400)

Ellen's constant attempts to withstand Sam's strategies of masculinisation for the boy do not really oppose Sam's efforts to make a proper man of their son, that is to say, to secure a place for Joe within English hegemonic masculinity. Ultimately, class rather than gender binds Ellen and Sam in the common project of turning their son into an educated middle-class man. This is, in a sense, the reason why Sam went to war and the reason why he didn't migrate to Australia: to give the children of his class and his son in particular a fair chance in a renovated, democratic England free from the threat of inner classism and outer fascism. Or so Sam and Ellen hope.

Before an understanding is reached between father and son, though, Sam must win the most important battle: reining in the veteran's rage that turned him into his own father's object of abuse. Joe, who is only three when Sam goes away, has no memories of his father and is shy to this big stranger who takes his place in his mother's bed and forces him to sleep alone. Bragg transfers to little Joe his own memory of kissing his father's photo goodnight long after the real father was back, a habit that deeply disturbs Sam. Afraid of his father's flaring anger, Joe starts to express his longing for the time when he and Ellen enjoyed each other's company, which makes Sam understandably even more jealous of their intimacy. As Ellen senses, this jealousy is the most disturbing factor in Sam's new personality and the main threat to family life. Although she tries to placate him, a first serious incident takes place when Sam is about to lift his hand against Joe for having wet his bed. Cleverly, Ellen tries to stop Sam's mounting jealousy by telling him that Joe is possibly not as tough as Sam would wish because "his absence had created a gap and a problem for his son" (Bragg 1999: 93), something Sam appreciates. The most serious crisis arises, though, when disappointed by Ellen's lack of support for his Australian project Sam ends up hitting Joe in frustration. Sam, who has so far taken pride in the fact that unlike most of his class peers he does not use violence to discipline his son, realises at that moment that he is about to become the kind of man his father was. The sight of his son on the platform and Alex's pushing him off the train is what finally makes Sam realise this needn't be the only road to the future.

A man still in the grip of his experience of physical abuse in childhood and in war may not be the best father, which is why Ellen is constantly quarrelling with Sam over his teaching Joe to use violence. While Sam argues that "If I don't harden him others'll do it and that'll be far worse for him. Boys soon know who's soft. He's got to stand up for himself" (*Return* 95), Ellen believes Joe needn't become a little warrior as Sam wants. On the whole, Joe's misadventures with a gang of bullies prove that Sam is right but ironically the lesson that Sam teaches Joe in the sequel goes in the opposite direction. To Joe's puzzlement Sam responds to some violent drunkards that disturb the order in his pub night after night with patient determination but without reciprocating their bullying. Joe's transition to adolescence, marked by deep irrational fears he can't bring himself to discuss with Sam, finally teaches the boy that cowardice and bravery have nothing to do with violence against other men but with learning to deal with one's own fears. That is, ultimately, the essence of a well-balanced masculinity according to Bragg.

To conclude, in *The Soldier's Return* and *A Son of War* Melvyn Bragg narrates how this modern, working-class Odysseus, Sam, successfully struggles to regain his patriarchal authority at home against the resistance of his wife, no longer a meek Penelope. Bragg suggests that Sam finally returns home in body and mind when he rejects the urge to replicate his father's violent silences; also, when he realises that his duty as a father is to offer Joe not a model to copy from but guidance and a chance for a better life through education. This altruistic will to help is precisely what Bragg celebrates as, considering the autobiographical aspects of these novels, he apparently benefited like Joe from this new paternal generosity. Despite the poignancy of Sam's suffering, we should not forget in any case that he disregards Ellen's wishes for a new kind of life arising from the altered gender roles brought on by the war.

The invalidation of her hopes and the failure of her attempts to change Sam or educate Joe clearly indicate that in these novels, as in the real life they represent, the discourse of patriarchy after WWII was not significantly altered by women's demands. If men changed, as it seems they did, this is because they followed their own need to regain their lost authority in the private patriarchal niches they occupied, whether in hegemonic or subordinate (but complicit) masculine models. When Sam and the men of their generation realised that they couldn't reclaim the same domestic power they enjoyed before the war nor break away from tight class constraints in its aftermath, they sought instead to secure their sons' chances for a better future. As Bragg's novels show, what was ultimately secured was the continuation of patriarchy under different circumstances rather than its replacement by something else. The sons of WWII veterans may feel simultaneously grateful and sorry for the father's sacrifices and silences, as Bragg no doubt feels, but they have a good reason to feel that way, as they are freer, more complete men than their parents were. The story of the veteran's daughter is completely different, though, as is proclaimed by her total absence from Bragg's novels. She still has to continue today her mothers' struggle against the protean ability of hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity to renew itself. And her story remains to be told.

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