

*Love and Limblessness:  
Male Heterosexuality, Disability, and the Great War*

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*Abstract*

Tens of thousands of British men were permanently wounded as a result of war service. Their return home sparked debates about the wounded male body, female accountability for war-injuries, and the ideology, performance, and practice of masculinity. Other historians have shown how 'broken heroes' from the First World War were constituted into 'men' in four contexts: physical appearance, occupation, sport, and Britishness. This article explores a fifth dimension: sexuality. It explores debates about the need for war-disabled men to establish stable marital relationships and investigates some attempts to encourage this, including encouraging women to take the initiative in proposing marriage and the establishment of The League for the Marrying of Broken Heroes.

*Keywords:*

First World War; disability; wounds; heterosexuality; marriage; masculinity; femininity; Vera Brittain.

In 1922, audiences flocked to see a silent film entitled 'The Jilt', directed by Irving Cummings. It became a sensation, in part because it starred the charismatic actress Marguerite De La Motte. It was promoted as 'a Picture that presents some of the After-War Problems in a New Light' (The Jilt (b), 1923: 2). Crucially, the film interrogated thorny questions of male heterosexuality, disability, and war.

The film has an improbable plot. De La Motte plays a young woman called Rose Trenton who agrees to marry George Prothero (Matt Moore), who had been blinded during the Great War. Within a short time, Rose realises that she has mistaken pity for love and another man – Sandy Sanderson (Ralph Graves) – has captivated her heart. After breaking off the engagement, the blind-George leaves for Europe. Rose and her new, physically-robust fiancé continue their courtship and are relieved when George returns and seems to harbour no resentment. One day, however, Sandy and George go for a ride, which ends with Sandy being killed by an unknown assassin. Rose is distraught. To her astonishment, however, she receives a letter from a French eye specialist informing her that, during his time in France, George had been cured of his blindness. Miraculously, Sandy then appears, accusing George of attempted murder. The couple are reunited and George leaves in disgrace.

'The Jilt' was based on a pre-war novel by romantic author Rina Ramsay, entitled *Barnaby*. The 1910 novel is different from the film in many ways. In the novel, the plot revolves around a duplicitous marriage between an American woman

and a wealthy Englishman. The novel's hero had not been rendered blind as a result of war service but had been wounded in a foxhunting accident. Crucially, however, in the novel the heroine falls in love with the delicate, wounded man, spurning the advances of a virile, young man who was also pursuing her (Ramsay, 1910). The exact opposite is the case in the 1922 film.

The reversal in the fortunes of the wounded men is significant. The pre-war novel presents the wounded man as an object of romance. He could be redeemed and healed through the loving ministrations of a good woman. In contrast, in the film version, which was made immediately after the First World War, the war-wounded man is portrayed as a scoundrel and eventually exposed as an attempted murderer. His wounds make him *less*, not more, of a man. Furthermore, the woman in the film version is no nurse, willing to sacrifice her life to care for her sick lover. Rather, she knows her own mind and, despite initially mistaking pity for love, quickly follows her heart's true desire.

Reviewers of the film seem impervious to the film's bizarre plot. On the contrary, they claimed that it was a *realistic* portrayal of tensions between the sexes in post-war Britain. In a review published in the *Burnley News*, a journalist observed that 'mistaking pity for love is probably the experience that hundreds of girls went through immediately after the recent great war'. During the war, many women came face to face with

heroes returning from the war with maimed limbs, scarred features, and other permanent injuries. These fellows with their sleeves dangling and their awkward consciousness of their new inferiority to other men, won instant sympathy from the girls who welcomed their homecoming.

It was a 'serious... mistake', however, when women 'married these broken heroes out of pity and without real love'. The reviewer warned that 'the wrong is as much to him as to her' (The Coliseum, Rosegrove, 1924: p. 4.).

These sentiments were echoed by another reviewer who explained that the film 'stars two war heroes, one of who is whole in body and mind, and the other crippled by the loss of his eyesight'. After making this distinction between 'wholeness' and blindness (which was presented as a form of crippling), the reviewer observed that the heroine promised to marry the disabled veteran 'but finds her emotion was merely one of pity, and not of love' (The Cosy, 1923: p. 4). Publicity for the film is even more revealing. Although the film starred *two* ex-servicemen vying for the love of one woman, advertisements stated that 'the drama works out in favour of the ex-serviceman' (The Jilt (a), 1923: p. 2). In other words, the military service of the *disabled* ex-serviceman was erased.

In this article, I will be arguing that the film and reactions to it are indicative of much broader debates taking place in British culture during and immediately after the war. 'The Jilt', with its theme of female pity for war-disabled men, was

contributing to a series of debates about male corporeality and female accountability. In the early years of the war, the ideology, performance, and practice of masculinity were epitomized through martial service; the female equivalent to the 'sacrifice' made by these 'broken warriors' was conceived of as *marital* devotion. After all, young men were voluntarily sacrificing their lives and limbs not only for King and Country, but also so that British women would be spared the indignities heaped on their Belgium counterparts. However, this portrayal of the gender contract did not survive the realities of total war. In the end, too many men had 'given' too much. As the heroine of the 1922 film 'The Jilt' eventually recognised, pity was the weakest foundation on which to rebuild new lives.

### *Disability and Sexuality*

The 1914-18 war devastated the bodies of millions of young men. 600,000 British men were discharged from the services as disabled and granted a pension or gratuity. By the end of the war, just under half a million men were in receipt of an artificial limb or other surgical appliance (Mitchell & Smith, 1931: pp. 315 and 339.). The bodies of these disabled citizens could not be portrayed as 'deformed' or 'defective'. Rather, they were young, previously healthy, masculine bodies that had been 'broken' while performing their patriotic duty. Unlike previous cohorts of disabled Britons – the resigned acceptance of the very young, the passive misery of the elderly, or the resentful distress of people disabled in factory, mining, or agricultural accidents – the wounded bodies of ex-servicemen were the product of violence *inflicted* as well as *suffered*. They were 'warriors', as well as disabled.

There was considerable anxiety about the reintegration of these previously healthy, young men back into masculine society. In recent years, historians have been interested in showing how ‘broken heroes’ from the First World War were constituted into ‘men’ in four contexts: physical appearance, occupation, sport, and Britishness. Broken bodies had to be put back together and – as historian Ana Carden-Coyne persuasively shows in *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (2009) – surgeons sought to reconstruct their bodies in line with the beauty and symmetry of classical masculine forms (Carden-Coyne, 2009. Also see Alberti, 2015; Carden-Coyne, 2014; Koureas, 2007.) There is an even larger historical literature showing the strong links between masculinity and employment (Anderson, 2011; Cohen, 2001; Kowalsky, 2007; Linker, 2011; Meyer, 2009). Disabled ex-servicemen had to be encouraged to ‘make a living’, thereby becoming economically independent and self-reliant. In the words of historian Deborah Cohen in *The War Come Home* (2001), independence was ‘the defining characteristic of middle-class Victorian masculinity’ (119.). The third area where the masculinity of war-wounded men was reconstituted was through sport. This has been less richly analysed by historians of disability. A notable exception is Julie Anderson’s *War, Disability, and Rehabilitation in Britain* (2011), where she argues that sport ‘gave disabled servicemen a space to renegotiate their position, restoring their masculine identity’ (55). Finally, disabled veterans were required to conform to an imagined ‘British’ form of comportment. They had to embody a Britishness consistent with ‘hearts’ made of ‘oak right through’ (Galsworthy, 1915: p. 5).

However, a masculine body, economic independence, an interest in sport, and an adherence to an imagined Britishness were not enough. In this article, I argue that sexuality was the fifth ideology, performance, and practice regarded as important in constituting masculinity. As we shall see, however, the desirable and desiring male body faced a crisis when hundreds of thousands of young men began returning from the front lines with devastating wounds. Heteronormative masculinity required mutilated men to join their non-disabled age-cohort through sexuality within marriage. This would also reinforce women's gendered role as nurturing, empathetic companions. However, the shift in attitudes towards love and disability that occurred between Ramsay's 1910 novel (*Barnaby*) and the 1922 film version ('The Jilt') is representative of wider changes in attitudes towards disabled heterosexuality.

Before turning to these changes, it is important to observe that throughout the war and post-war years, it was accepted that a man's penis and testicles were important signifiers of masculinity. Male sexuality placed inordinate emphasis on the active penis. Whether the result of disease, accident, or simply the vicissitudes of aging, impotence was a blow to men's sense of masculinity. This was particularly the case for young men who, in times of war, faced a significantly heightened risk of castration by weapons of war. In 1918, surgeon Charles Greene Cumston observed that wounds of the 'genital organs' had been 'relatively frequent in this war'. He advised that it was an absolute rule ('which never suffers an exception') that surgeons had to practice 'conservative surgery' (that is, removing as little tissue as possible) when operating on 'young adults in full genital maturity'. Not only would

these men be 'called upon later on to play an important part in the future life of their country', but they universally placed 'great value' on 'the organ in question' (Cumston, 1918: pp. 306-7).

The value of the penis and testicles was not merely a feature of individual performance: it was inscribed in governmental ideology. In their 'Assessment of Disability', the Department of Pensions judged the loss of the penis or its ability to function to be comparable to the loss of expectation of life. In comparing the relative importance of organs deserved the highest pension, the Department concluded that 'the only organs of importance to consider [in this category] are the kidneys and the testicles' (Assessment of Disablement. n.d.). Crucially, *damage* to the penis or testicles were considered to be less serious than the loss of *function* or the ability to bear children. The 'penetration of penis without fistula', 'destruction of one testicle', and 'partial destruction of penis' were categorized under 'very serious' or 'severe' while 'such a degree of loss of genitalia as to render the man impotent and infertile' were decreed to be 'in excess of loss of limb', the most serious category of all. In other words, *function* of the male genitalia was rated more important than aesthetic considerations (Report of Committee on the Classification of Wounds and Injuries, n.d. Also see Wounds. Classification of War Wounds. Revised Schedule, n.d.) Age was irrelevant, as was whether the disabled man was married or already had children: loss of sexual function or ability were *in themselves* regarded as destroying a man. After all, the Ministry of Pensions concluded,



The men concerned are all men in the prime of life, & it is not thought possible to attempt to the assessment of value to the individual any more than it is attempted to assess the difference in value for the necessities of life as apart from the effect on earning capacity in the case of a Specific Injury. To the student whose chief recreation is an armchair & a book the loss of a leg is nothing as compared to the athlete, & yet the compensation is the same.

Similarly, it was not wise to make distinctions 'on the personal side', that is, the degree of 'pain and suffering' experienced by individuals losing their penis or testicles (Scale for Minor Injuries, 1917). Medical boards were explicitly instructed that 'High assessments should... be made where any deformity prevents sexual intercourse' or where the man was unmanned, as when 'loss of penis involves feminine micturition' (Ministry of Pensions. General Directions for the Guidance of Chairmen and Members of Medical Boards, n.d.: p. 30). The emphasis on the reproductive function of male genitals (as opposed to mere appearance) inevitably involved questions of active heterosexuality and, by extension, marriage and procreation.

### *Women's Duties*

Men who had suffered severe injuries to their penis, or had otherwise been rendered impotent during war service, were a common theme in the literature of

the interwar years. However, they were largely ignored in public debates about returning servicemen. The assumption that sexuality required an active penis was taken for granted. Genitally wounded men stood outside realms of marriageability.

This was not the case for other injured men. Limblessness, facial disfiguration, and blindness did not render a man unmarriageable. Indeed, there were impassioned attempts to claim that these disabled men were *particularly* valued as marriage partners on eugenic grounds. In *The Eugenic Review*, for example, Leonard Darwin fretted that 'strong, courageous or patriotic' men were being 'singled out for destruction' in war while 'the unfit are being kept at home to become the fathers of families'. In the post-war world, he argued, these virile men needed to be encouraged to marry in order that their 'manly qualities' would be passed on to the next generation (Darwin, 1915: pp. 91-2. Also see Chambers, 1915): pp. 271-90). Sybil Gotto was even more forthright. Writing in 1917, she observed that

As all those who were unfit were rejected for the Army, and even those who were less fit who entered the Army did not reach the fighting lines, it may be taken that those men discharged *through wounds* are on the average the inherently fitter members of the community and as such have an added value as potential parents of the future generation.

It was the responsibility of local committees to ensure that these disabled men were given opportunities to meet 'women of good character', with the intention to marry and procreate (pp. 188 and 204). Surely, the editor of *The Charity Organisation Review* argued in 1915, an additional pension should be given to *any* war-disabled 'hero' who subsequently fathered a child (Editorial Notes, 1915: p. 373). As another commentator put it, mutilated soldiers and sailors were 'on the average superior to the general body of the population' and ensuring that they married and reproduced was 'an important means of racial repair' ('R. A. F.', 1917: p. 55). Indeed, *The Eugenics Review* reported in 1917, of the 296 single ex-servicemen staying at the Blinded Soldiers' and Sailors' Hostel at St. Dunstan's (London), 18 per cent had married since their disablement. Their wives were not only described as 'extremely suitable' but were also 'almost without exception... unusually good looking' ('R. A. F.', 1917: p. 55).

This needed to be encouraged. Because opportunities for 'soldiers who return broken from war' to meet 'responsible' women were 'at best forbidding' it was necessary to engineer new encounters (Marriages for Broken Heroes, 1915: p. 4). Pragmatically, it was widely accepted that rehabilitation of wounded men would be sped up with the help of attractive young women (Baldwin, 1920: p. 279; Cohen, 1956: p. 44; Simmons, 1956: pp. 188-91).

### *Crises of Dismemberment and Bereavement*

In the early years of the war, there was also a *moral* imperative to such marriages: women owed a duty of care and affection to the 'broken warriors'. Newspaper reports repeatedly emphasised 'The Salute of Gratitude' due to returning servicemen (The Salute of Gratitude, 1918: p. 6).

The problem was: how should disabled ex-servicemen be led into marriage with eligible women? Perhaps disabled men needed a 'nudge' from women themselves. The most detailed discussion about whether an alliance could – or should – be forged between the male crisis of dismemberment and the female crisis of bereavement can be found in Vera Brittain's memoir, *Testament of Youth*. In it, she conjured up the evening in Malta when she had been informed that her close friend Geoffrey Thurlow had been shot by a sniper and killed. On being told the news, she went outside to think. As she gazed out to sea, she suddenly recalled an 'Agony Column' that she had read two years earlier. It had been written by a woman whose fiancé had been killed. This bereaved woman was advertising the fact that she was keen to meet, and would 'gladly marry', an officer who was 'totally blinded or otherwise incapacitated by the war'.

Brittain admitted that she was initially 'a little startled' by the letter, before she was struck by 'the tragedy of it'. She speculated that the recently-bereaved woman probably

has no particular gift or qualification, and does not want to face the dreariness of an unoccupied and unattached old-maidhood. But the only person she loves is dead; all men are alike to her and it is a matter of indifference whom she marries, so she thinks she may as well marry someone who really needs her, and will perhaps find relieve for her sorrow in devoting her life to him. It is a purely business arrangement, with an element of self-sacrifice which redeems it from utter sordidness (Brittain, 1960 (1933): p. 245).

At the time, Brittain had pitied the woman, but reflecting on it after Thurlow's death, she experienced a very different emotion. Another close friend – Victor Richardson – had recently been shot and blinded. Should she make a similar sacrifice? Brittain reflected that

there was nothing left in life now but Edward [her brother] and the wreckage of Victor – Victor who had stood by me so often in my blackest hours. If he wanted me, surely I could stand by him in his (Brittain, 1960 (1933): pp. 245-46).

A few weeks after Richardson's wounding, Brittain wrote a letter to her brother. In it, she agreed that 'you & I must make things worth while to Victor as his family is inadequate for dealing with the situation, & Mother says that in future days "he must be our especial care".' She recognised 'our responsibility towards him – not only because of our love for him, but because of his love for us, & the love felt for

him by the One we loved & lost', that is, her fiancé, Roland Leighton. As a consequence, she continued,

I should be more glad than I can say to offer him a very close & life-long devotion if he would accept it, & I can't imagine that Roland, if He had known what was to be... would be anything but glad too.

The 'the only way to repay even one little bit of the debt to Them [the dead] is through the one who remains' (Bishop and Bostridge, 1998: p. 350). After this declaration that she was willing to marry the blind and desperately ill Richardson, Brittain returned to England, intending to propose. But Richardson died shortly afterwards.

### *Proposing Marriage*

Brittain's musings on the debt women owed to wounded men and the decency, or otherwise, of women promising marriage to their 'wounded heroes' were widely discussed in the early years of the war. For example, Miss G. Ivy Sanders was proponent of female employment and journalist. In April 1916, she was at the forefront of an animated debate about whether unmarried women should be allowed to propose to men disabled during the war. In her article, which was published in the *Sunday Mirror*, she made an argument in favour of women taking the initiative by conjuring up a discussion between herself and her uncle. She purported to be shocked when her uncle claimed that 'thousands of cowards will

return from the war.... Among them there will be V.C.s, D.S.O.s, D.C.M.s'. When pressed, her uncle explained that

though outwardly they may be heroes, to their own hearts they will be traitors. They may have faced death nobly in the trenches, but their wounds and disfigurements will rob them of the moral courage to ask the girl they love to share their lives.

Sanders pretended to be outraged by her uncle's suggestion that women take the initiative in proposing marriage but was persuaded that the new woman should be proud of her lover's 'honoured wounds'. His 'new weakness' would 'appeal to her even more than his erstwhile strength'. Indeed, Sander's uncle believed that 'most men have two mothers' and it was

difficult for us men to realise which we need most in our wives – the mother love or the sweetheart's – and... in many cases it will be the tender care of the former that his suffering and infirmities will need.

It was a theme that was more in line with the pre-war novel *Barnaby* than its post-war film version. As the author of an article entitled 'War Marriages' (1914) concluded, it was a wise woman who married their lovers just before they embarked for war. If her newly wedded husband was subsequently wounded, she

knows with what sheer delight she will nurse him and tend him back to health again.... There is a strong strain of the maternal in every good woman's love for her husband; and never does she get so close to his heart or he to hers, as when she is ministering to his helplessness (War Marriages, 1914: p. 2. Also see Woman's Problem of War and Love, 1914: p. 2; 'A Veteran', 1918: p. 21).

Women with 'pluck' would always choose to marry for love – that is, the love of the 'maimed and crippled hero' (Sanders, 1916: p. 5. Also see Blythe, 1979: p. 164 and Simmons, 1956: p. 188).

A few days after Sander's article was published, the *Western Daily Press* took up the theme. This journalist worried that, when the war ended, there would be thousands of 'wounded heroes' who were 'so disfigured and helpless that they will never have the courage to ask the women they love to marry them'. As a consequence, women would be forced to take the initiative in proposing marriage. The *Western Daily Press* journalist warned that it was not only *unlikely* that women would have the courage to propose marriage, but it was dangerous as well. He doubted that the 'refined educated woman, who has been accustomed to be wooed 'ere she is won' would ever contemplate being so bold. Men, too, would balk at this demeaning of their status: although 'shattered in health and strength', a war-wounded man would not like to 'feel he was being treated differently to the rest of his sex'. Worse still, 'would he not fancy he was being married out of pity, and what man could bear that?' There was also the problem of mismatched feelings. What



would happen if the man was 'too chivalrous to mortify her by a refusal'? Equally tricky was if the 'wounded hero' had to 'gently convey' to the wooing woman his determination to remain unhitched. It was best not to even contemplate such scenarios: the sensible woman would just have to let her beau know her feelings in subtle ways 'without reversing the usual order of things by proposing to him' (*Should Women Propose?*, 1916): p. 9.).

In January 1917, the *Western Daily Press* returned to the question, although in a more favourable way. Again, the journalist feared that allowing women to propose marriage would 'destroy all the romance... offend the proprieties... shock Mrs Grundy'. However, he conceded that female-instigated proposals of marriage were probably necessary for 'that tragic class of brave heroes who have been maimed and crippled for life in this terrible war'. 'Surely', the journalist contended, 'here is a case in which it would only be right for the girl to propose'. Discretion was necessary, of course. He advised women to adopt an indirect approach in order not to 'hurt the man's feelings'. If the love was mutual, the man would 'quickly understand' since 'between two who love there is immense mutual sympathy and telepathy would do the rest' (*Should Women Propose?*, 1917: p. 7).

#### *The League for the Marrying of Broken Heroes*

Clearly, there was considerable sensitivity around the issue of whether women should be allowed to propose marriage to men. Leap-year proposals were

one thing; potentially offending the masculinity of disabled men in normal times, quite another. The question remained, therefore: how were women to make their 'salute of gratitude' to men who had sacrificed health and limbs to safeguard them from the rapacious Hun?

One proposal was the establishment of 'Nice Girls' Visiting Bands', to minister to men in hospitals (All the Nice Girls Love a Soldier, 1916: p. 2). Others, however, believed that this indirect approach to procuring wives for wounded men was not going far enough. A more formal mechanism was needed. In 1915, a solution was proposed: why not establish a League for the Marrying of Broken Heroes?

The idea was the brainchild of 59-year-old General Joubert-Pienaar, an Afrikaner who lobbied on behalf of veterans. Joubert-Pienaar appealed for 'girls of pluck' to marry disabled soldiers. He claimed to have received 'tender and touching' correspondence from a large number of Englishwomen who had 'lost their brother and lovers at the front'. Unable to reply personally to every woman, he asked the *Daily Mail* to convey his admiration of English 'girls' who had 'pluck enough' to think about proposing marriage to dismembered warriors. Since women were 'naturally shy to offer themselves to any man', Joubert-Pienaar proposed formalising arrangements. He explained that he had received letters from

hundreds of good plucky girls to-day, mostly English who are willing to give their lives to the unfortunate wounded, but they must have an introduction. Now I have got an offer from some West End ladies who

are ready to do just what is required..... I think this matter should be taken up vigorously and worked to a successful end (Wives for Disabled Heroes, 1915: p. 2).

Joubert-Pienaar never named those 'West End ladies' who would arrange respectable introductions but we do know that his appeal was taken up by Rev. Ernest Houghton (rector of St Stephen's in Bristol), the Rev. H. F. T. Shellard (curate of St. Stephens), and physician Meaburn Staniland. The League for the Marrying of Broken Heroes was born.

In October 1915, Houghton set out its aims. He explained that it was 'not to be tolerated' that 'a man who has freely offered himself for his country' and was subsequently wounded would have 'no alternative but to spend his broken life in grim, untended loneliness, or the grey depression of an institution'. So important was marriage and family life to truly being a man that Houghton insisted that, if denied marital comforts, it would have been 'better for him... if his days were ended on the field of battle'. Houghton was confident that 'many noble minded women' would 'gladly give their lives and strength to ameliorate the conditions of such men and bring about a consecrated marriage' (Turmoil and – Peace?, 1915: p. 4). After all, the best marriages were based on 'high unselfishness', particularly of wives (Marriage of Broken Heroes, 1915: p. 4).

Houghton's appeal seems to have struck a chord: he received 400 letters of support from all over the UK (Marriage of Broken Heroes, 1915: p. 4). Dr Murray

Leslie was one of the League's keen supporters. In a talk given in April 1916, Leslie observed that 'there have been numerous instances where our girls had been only too delighted to marry the men of their choice after they have been disfigured or disabled'. He wanted to encourage 'admiration for our disabled war heroes' and insisted that, since it was 'quite easy for a woman to idealise a scoundrel; surely it ought to be still easier for her to idealise a hero' (p. 12). Or, as one reporter mused, 'Only the psychologist can say with any degree of authority what constitutes the mainspring of a woman's love for the man she selects'. He remained convinced though that a woman's love was not 'due solely to physical perfection' in her mate. Instead, the 'old adage' was closer to the truth: 'The man falls in love with what he sees. The woman with what she hears' (*Marriages for Broken Heroes*, 1915: p. 4).

There were also strong eugenic benefits to marrying war-maimed men. Women were encouraged to sexually spurn men who had been judged sickly by recruitment boards, and instead to embrace those who had proved themselves to be patriotic, physically robust, and gutsy. In October 1915, the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Adviser* contended that it was 'of the utmost importance that the rearing of families should not be confined to those whose physical defects have made them useless as soldiers'. He urged women to marry wounded men: 'the pick of the nation's manhood' (*Marriages for Broken Heroes*, 1915: p. 4). In February 1916, the former High Sherriff of Devon put the point even stronger. Speaking at a meeting of the Royal West of England Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, he reminded women not to be anxious about marrying wounded men 'for fear their offspring might suffer.... any bad result'. On the contrary, it was better to 'be the son

of a severely wounded man, who might be suffering even from the penultimate effects of wounds' (that is, death) than to be 'the son of one of those men who had exercised the undoubted privilege of Englishmen, and refused to fight for his country' (Wounded Soldiers, 1916: p. 6). In other words, it was preferable for women to procreate with severely injured men than to consort with cowards or civilian invalids.

Some women needed reassuring. In a talk entitled 'The Disabled Soldier: His Future and His Economic Value', Leslie observed that there was still a 'curious belief, widely entertained among women, that deformities were inherited'. He reiterated the fact that 'No acquired deformities, dismemberments, or mutilations were ever transmitted to offspring'. Indeed, Leslie continued, the offspring of such matches would more likely inherit their fathers' superior traits of courage and valour (Leslie, 1916: p. 12). Houghton also championed this position, reminding women that men who had 'risen to heights of moral heroism' would pass on such traits to their offspring. Indeed, children born of such men were 'likely to be of the very best such as the nation needs' (Marriage of Broken Heroes, 1915: p. 4).

### *Masculinity and the Repudiation of Pity*

If press reports are any indication, the League incited considerable interest and intrigue. However, it failed to ignite a marital revolution. There were cynical voices. Some questioned the unselfishness of women, openly speculating that such marriages might benefit lonely spinsters more than their maimed mates. A reporter

for *Well's Journal* sarcastically noted that women who were 'fair, fat, and forty' were making 'covert inspections in their mirrors'. They were beginning to feel that they were 'in the running' again' (Turmoil and – Peace?, 1915: p. 4). Furthermore, it seems that women did not need the help of a League to give them the courage to propose.

However, critics of the League did not question its premise that women had a duty to sacrifice their own interests on behalf of 'broken heroes'. Nor did criticism of the League focus on its objectives: there was widespread agreement that action had to be taken to establish wounded ex-servicemen in reproductive marriages.

Rather, concerns focussed on the *means* being employed to match disabled men with agreeable women. As one unnamed woman mused, wasn't the scheme 'fraught with such chances of ill-sorted marriages', making it 'little better than a matrimonial agency on the newspaper advertisement lines'? She pointed out that 'This indiscriminate allotment of partners is surely not the right way for intensely patriotic Englishwomen to do something for England'. Like Brittain, she criticised the woman who advertised in *The Times* about her 'willingness to marry an incapacitated officer' after her fiancé had 'fallen in the field'. Bereaved women should show 'sympathy and self-abnegation in a better way', she advised. Surely traditional ways of matchmaking were still preferable (A Woman's Outlook, 1915, p. 4)? Still others worried that the 'right kind of woman' would not be attracted to the League and 'those who volunteered in the heat of patriotic zeal' might not 'own sufficient staying power to devote themselves for life to disabled husbands'

(Volunteer Wives for Disabled Soldiers, 1915: p. 8). Finally, weren't the schemes forgetting the desires of the men themselves? After all, 'surely, the men who have suffered should be allowed the privilege of choosing wives for themselves' (Volunteer Wives for Disabled Soldiers, 1915: p. 8). Concerns about the propriety of official matchmaking schemes were probably the reason the Bishop of Bristol forced Houghton to withdraw from leadership of the League (Marriage of Broken Heroes, 1915: p. 4).

It is also significant that support for the League plummeted after the Somme Offensive. From July 1916, British hospitals and streets were teeming with maimed and limbless men: there were simply too many 'broken heroes' to absorb into conjugal partnerships. The introduction of compulsory military service in March 1916 also changed attitudes towards servicemen and, from May, not all servicemen could be assumed to be unmarried since married men became eligible for conscription. The rhetoric of 'wounded warriors' or 'broken heroes' began to feel inappropriate when applied to citizen soldiers.

In addition, many public commentators detected a backlash against the overly sentimental rhetoric that had flourished during the early years of the conflict. The war was patently not going to end before Christmas; the carnage of the Somme squashed any residual chivalric fantasies. In August 1916, writer James Douglas put it bluntly when he argued that journalists and others had a duty to portray the 'awful realism' of war. He reminded readers that war was

now waged between nations. It is no longer a profession. The soldiers are no longer a caste. Every son now born in this pestilential Europe is born a soldier.

As a result, everyone needed to acknowledge their 'obligation towards the men who are "broken in our wars".' He reminded readers that disability was 'not in the least pretty or picturesque.... It is repugnant and very squalid and very disagreeable'. Douglas flung aside the rhetoric trope of the active, heterosexual sufferer. In contrast, he characterized mutilated soldiers as children, contending that 'every disabled soldier ought to be adopted by the nation and cared for as a mother cares for her child' (Douglas, 1916: p. 4).

Douglas was a very popular journalist, but cannot be assumed to be typical. There was one theme, however, that he and other commentators returned to time and again: women were emasculating men. Their pity was stifling. Newspaper reporters observed that disabled veterans 'do not desire pity – indeed, they resent it' (Employing the Disabled, 1915: p. 3). Wounded men spoke openly about dreading becoming 'mere objects of pity' (Facial Injuries, 1917: p. 7). Increasingly, everyone seemed to agree with 'The Jilt' that it was objectionable to marry out of pity. In the words of an unnamed journalist in April 1916,

It would be disastrous for both if the woman were to marry out of a feeling of pity or because she considered she was bound in honour....

It would be better for the wounded man to remain unmarried than to



be married to a woman who only became his wife out of a feeling of pity (*Should Women Propose?*, 1916: p. 9).

'The Jilt' triumphed over *Barnaby*.

Debates about marriage and disabled men also became tangled up with a growing critique of wartime femininity. A detailed example of this can be seen in April 1916 when the *Daily Mirror* used the League as a starting point in a particularly vicious condemnation of Britain's womanhood. According to this newspaper, women were turning into marriage-crazed harridans. The journalist (known only by the initials 'W.M.') started his attack by imagining a war hero being asked what it was like to be wounded. The hero was said to have replied,

Oh, well, mum, you hear a dreadful row one moment and the next moment you hear a voice saying 'Lift up your head and drink this soup, it will do you good'.

'W.M.' wished that 'the best or worst the hero had to face were simply that soup'. Instead, wounded soldiers were expected to continue doing 'what he's told for the good of the country', including being bullied by women into marriage. In W.M.'s words,

His latest order from the community – which can, if it is allow, become the greatest of political tyrants – is to get married for the

good of the race.... if [by] miracle he has so far escaped [marriage] – why then the first whisper he'll hear as he raises his head after that dreadful row [of the shells] is: 'You are to get married immediately'. They talk, in fact, of founding a League for the Marrying of Wounded Heroes.

The journalist sarcastically asked, 'Why is a League necessary? Can't the Heroes help themselves?' He imagined a limbless 'Private A.B.' being bullied:

We give you, Private A.B. just a week; after that you will be fined. Now, no shilly-shallying. Obey orders, March. Right turn. Discipline can apply to matrimony....

In other words, the League was in cahoots with spinsters, bossing 'wounded warriors' into submission. Men like Private A.B. had been conscripted into the armed forces in defence of women and children and then, when wounded, conscripted into marrying those women and giving them children ('W.M.', 1916: p. 5).

The restitution of male dominance had to be insisted upon. Conceiving of war-wounded men as 'broken heroes' allowed them to be positioned above women – or 'plucky girls'. A music hall joke told during a recruitment meeting in 1915 was representative of many attempts to reassure young men. It featured an elderly woman visiting a hospital for the war wounded. She asked one patient where he was wounded, to which the embarrassed soldier responded, 'Well, Mam – if you had

been wounded where I've been wounded, you wouldn't be wounded at all' (Wilkinson, n.d.: p. 1). In other words, women were *already* and always castrated. In every respect, even the wounded man was a cut above women.

### *Conclusion*

The League and other benevolent attempts to help 'wounded heroes' did not survive the wartime crisis of 1916. The six props of masculinity – appearance, economic independence, camaraderie through the sporting body, white Britishness, and heterosexuality – were mutually reinforcing: when one or more waned, all were to some degree undermined. In this article, my emphasis has been on the politics of heterosexuality, but ex-servicemen rapidly recognised its impotence when faced with a disabled body and the collapse of their economic, sporting, and patriotic identifications. With the restoration of peace, disabled veterans posed an economic threat to the capitalist state: their pensions were thought to be draining already haemorrhaging coffers; their labour value was at an all-time low; and Victorian ideologies of self-help were redundant. With the coming economic depression, the complaints of neglect became more and more pronounced. In the bitter words of one ex-servicemen, signing himself 'One of England's Broken Dolls', the popular war-time ballad that promised that 'We shall kiss you and cheer you when you come back again' was 'nothing but hypocrisy and cant'. ('One of England's Broken Dolls', 1923: p. 5). Those women who *did* marry their wounded heroes were expected to walk a tightrope of gender relations. Brunel Cohen, who had lost both legs during the Great War, believed that it was crucial for war-disabled men to marry because

if his wife is the right type of person – and so many women are – she can make life for him infinitely easier without his ever knowing it..... Most people value their independence but, I believe, a man does so more than a woman. So long as she is in the background just there, jagg[ing] [sic] him along slightly, slowly and surely, at the same time letting him think he is the leader and the boss, she can in a quiet and retiring way make him achieve miracles (Cohen, 1956: p. 145).

There was to be no disruption of gendered power relations within post-war home, whether the husband was disabled or not.

Even if their virility could be restored through marriage, the corporeal crisis unleashed by war was unprecedented: too many men had ‘given’ too much. Pity, though, was the great enemy: the fastest way to ‘unsteel’ the ‘soul’ of the disabled was by drowning them in tea (Galsworth, 1919: p. 9). As one armless man advised fellow sufferers in 1922, they should

set their teeth and deliberately fight against any feeling of impotence.... ‘Sursum corda’ [lift up your hearts] should be the motto of such men; I might even say ‘Sursum corda’, or ‘Keep your tail up’ (Lieut.-Gen. Sir E. C. Bethune, in Howson, 1922: p. 113).

As in 'The Jilt', mistaking pity for love was not only denigrating for the woman but also for the disabled man, who might in fact be a rogue after all. Better to marry the strong, virile veteran than the blinded scoundrel. The failure of restoring the masculinity of 'Broken Heroes' was clear for all to see.

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