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“The Great War Drama:” Theater and Performance in Helen Zenna Smith’s *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*

War participants consistently struggle with ways to comprehend and articulate the unspeakable realities of war. Language often fails, leaving observers with the complex burden of sewing together the disparate fragments of their experiences. *Not So Quiet...Stepdaughters of War*, a fictional recreation of a Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) ambulance driver’s experiences in World War I, exemplifies the struggle to process and communicate wartime experiences. *Not So Quiet* was written by Evadne Price under the pseudonym of Helen Zenna Smith. Jane Marcus explains that while Price did not serve in the Great War, she strove to write a text faithful to the experience. Price based *Not So Quiet* on her friend Winifred Young’s diary of her experiences as a VAD ambulance driver (266). Young’s, and by extension Price’s, difficulty with finding language to represent wartime experiences is also seen in the protagonist, Helen Smith, who refers to herself as “Smithy” throughout the novel. In the text, Smithy adopts the theater metaphor as the trope best to represent her experiences. She programs war’s events, as they occur, to fit into the theater model. As a result, she becomes an actress who can inhabit many different roles, and she sees others around her as characters in the tragedy of war. She also uses the lens of theater to analyze the war myths and gender scripts disseminated by propaganda. She challenges them by recasting the heroines and antagonists in her own depiction of the tragedy of war. While the theater metaphor is a tool that allows Smithy to cope with trauma, at
least temporarily, the metaphor ultimately breaks down and her identity becomes irreparably fragmented as a result.

**Theater Metaphor Conceptualizes the War**

War is a chaotic and disorderly experience, incapable of being quantified and explained, but according to Paul Fussell, “[t]he dramaturgic provided a dimension within which the unspeakable could to a degree be familiarized and interpreted” (199). The substitution of the theater metaphor for war provides an opportunity to structure unquantifiable occurrences. Bruce Wilshire explains that theater as a metaphor “thematizes and memorializes events of encounter that might otherwise fly by in our experience and get lost” (238). The theater metaphor thus offers Smithy an artistic way of grasping the war experience which might have otherwise been lost. This strategy for understanding the war “thematizes these protometaphorical correspondences, so the world is mapped into a ‘world’” (Wilshire 239).

However, the alternate “world” constructed by the theater metaphor also interrupts and destroys the real, making Smithy’s experiences hyperrealities, mere copies of the original. Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, explains the real and the hyperreal by alluding to Jorge Luis Borges’ tale in “On Exactitude in Science.” There is an original territory of an Empire and a map of that territory. When history progresses and the territory is destroyed, the tattered and rotting map is all that remains. The crude map becomes the resource that replaces the reality of the territory itself, since the map is all that is that is known. The “real” fades away and simulation becomes a matter of “substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double” (Baudrillard 2). For Smithy, the theater imagery and metaphors used to describe war become the map (the hyperreal), and the war itself (the real) becomes irrelevant.
The hyperreal of the theater has replaced the real to the extent that Smithy perceives the world around her through the lens of theater. When Smithy enters the war, her entire existence changes and she must operate in a sphere that is far removed from the life she previously knew. The war immediately offers a new reality, similar to stepping into a theater and playing a new role. Her entire life changes just as instantaneously as a curtain rises, and she faces new living conditions, diet, sense of propriety, and daily duties. Smithy reminisces about the night she arrived at her convoy and was “shoved on to an ambulance and told to meet my first convoy of wounded” (11). Before that night, she had never even driven at night, much less cared for mangled men. She is required, mentally and physically, to adapt to a world “where life has suddenly become sordid” (10).

The new, sordid stage Smithy is shoved onto is populated with characters who are designed to play certain roles in the theater of war. When Smithy introduces the young women in her first convoy, she describes them by one defining characteristic, much like characters are introduced in the playbill appearing at the beginning of a script. She says:

The B.F.’s father is a motor manufacturer; Etta Potato is a virgin war widow: her husband went straight from the registry office to the trenches and was killed a week later; Tosh has been in the picture papers so often she hasn’t a shred of private life left; Skinny is the only child of a big pot at the War Office; while I am the nondescript daughter of a nondescript father…” (23)

These descriptions are all connected in a single sentence; they are reductive identity tags that summarize each character before her depth unfolds within the tragedy.

The VAD drivers in her convoy, as well as the WAAC (Women’s Auxiliary Army Core) women, are all given nicknames that reflect their characterization, and the girls adhere to the
roles they are assigned. For example, Etta Potter dissolves into Etta Potato because “someone dubbed her Etta Potato the day she came out, and Etta Potato she will be for the duration” (22). The B.F. stands for “bloody fool,” (74) an identity Bertina Farmer carries out throughout the novel. The Bug, Skinny, Etta Potato, Tosh, Mrs. Bitch, Mother Confessor, Misery, Blimey, and Cheery all play roles symbolized by their nicknames, roles they stepped into when they enlisted for the war. The war itself also determines their roles; Wilshire notes that characters “emerge from within the style and mood of the play as a whole,” and a character is formed out of “responsiveness” to the mood of the play (209). In this case, the war’s dire mood influences the characterization subscribed to each girl. The girls’ identities, determined by their nicknames, become hyperrealities for their “real” selves.

Smithy’s experiences are so mitigated by the lens of theater that she sees the war around her as a drama unfolding before her eyes. Throughout the novel, she sees several events as “scenes” that she observes through the perspective of an ancillary, on-stage character. For example, after several weeks, Smithy becomes acquainted with her responsibilities as ambulance driver and knows the role she must play in front of Commandant to avoid punishment. However, new recruits are not aware of Commandant’s expectations, and they are punished when they act outside of her realm of expectations. When Preston and the new recruits arrive from England and argue with Commandant, Smithy has no desire to watch because she “know[s] the scene and the dialogue word for word” (70), and she imagines a script for their conversation. It contains tag lines for the “Commandant” and “The Fool,” in addition to italicized stage directions and notes. The scene is about how the new recruit doesn’t feel prepared to drive the ambulance at night and care for injured men without any training. The scene ends as follows:
COMMANDANT (*playing her trump card*): Oh! Perhaps you’d better go back to England, then!

THE FOOL (*hastily*): Oh, no! Please! It’s only because I haven’t any idea what it means driving an ambulance of wounded in the dark…

COMMANDANT (*sweetly*): Then you’ll be able to tell us what it’s like at midnight tonight.

*(CURTAIN.)* (71-72)

The scene format shows that even in the present moment, the theater metaphor structures Smithy’s reality. She must watch humiliation unfold over and over, and although she anticipates the negative outcome, she has no power to interfere. The curtain closes on their scene, and the antagonist prevails.

Smithy continues to see recurring events as “scenes,” and she sees herself as a secondary character on stage. When Smithy attends a young man’s funeral by the Witch’s Hand, a menacing tree that functions as a recurring symbol throughout the novel, she reflects upon the life of the soldier, comparing his time in the war to a performance:

*I have lost count of the number of times I have been a supernumerary in the last scene of the great war drama that opens daily in a recruiting office and drops its final curtain amid no applause on a plain deal coffin draped with a Union Jack, to the tune of ‘The Last Post’ from an orchestra of two.* (116)

Smithy sees the individual life of each soldier as a “great war drama” that begins when he signs up for the war in a recruiting office. He is the star actor in his drama, and his particular scene ends when the “final curtain” signifies his death. This performance is a clear tragedy because his curtain drops “amid no applause.” This signifies that the audience finds applause to be
incongruous with the tragedy of killing and dying. This could also imply that the man did not receive appropriate commendation for his performance, signified by the meager “orchestra of two” playing the final number, as opposed to the full sound of a symphony.

Smithy sees herself as a “supernumerary” at the funeral of these men, which implies that she is not a starring role, but merely an extra, condemned to watch the scene unfold before her. She is an observer, but she is still positioned on the stage of the Great War. She has “lost count” of the number of times she has played a supernumerary character, which implies that she has witnessed a high number of “final scenes,” or deaths. This analogy parallels the scene she witnesses between Commandant and the Fool. She is not actively involved in the dialogue, but she stands and observes so many times that she incidentally memorizes the script. Smithy is doomed to watch the tragedy unfold on stage before her, and she is powerless to stop it.

Smithy is disillusioned by the number of times she has been doomed to watch the curtain drop on the lives of young men, and she perceives their enlistment and death as the melodramatic cycle of war: men enlist, men die. Fussell also comments on the dramatic nature of war. He applies the theater metaphor not only to the lives of the individual men, but the action of the war in general, noting that “if killing and avoiding being killed are the ultimate melodramatic actions, then military training is very largely training in melodrama” (192). The play ends, for Smithy, in a gruesome march of maimed men, which haunts her every time she closes her eyes, an “endless procession of horror that will not let me rest” (163). The melodramatic action of war stays with Smithy even when she is off duty. She meets Robin, a twenty-year-old-boy who “has not been out to hell yet” (173). She sleeps with him because he is innocent, but Smithy, knowing the predictable, dramatic action of war, cries for his future, thinking, “Poor Robin, poor baby, poor
baby” (174). Her experience as a supernumerary teaches her that Robin will inevitably join the procession of tortured men.

The men’s lives are individual scenes, and the Great War itself is an unparalleled tragedy. Smithy becomes outraged by war, the result of which, according to Laurie Kaplan, is “mutilation, trauma, and death” (42). Fussell argues that applying the theater metaphor to war offers relief because “just as a play must have an ending, so might the war” (199). However, Smithy knows that the war can last an infinite amount of time, and the final curtain call is distant and unforeseeable. She acknowledges that the war, even before its completion, is a “drama that can already boast one of the longest runs on record.” She wonders, “When will the final performances be announced?” (116). Smithy doesn’t need to see the end of the war to know how the tragedy ends. Inevitably, it ends in a gruesome parade of dead and maimed soldiers, injured physically or psychologically, and she cannot divert her stare.

Smithy sees objects around her as symbolic proof that war is a tragedy. A tree that Smithy names “The Witch’s Hand” stretches over a soldier burial ground. She says the tree is “hollow-palmed, sinister, greedy. Strangely symbolic of war. Reaching out and demanding. Demanding…never denied…the Hand will have its fill of victims to-day” (114-15). The Witch’s Hand recurs throughout the novel, usually accompanying unjust death. Smithy attends a funeral at the grave site and notices that “it reaches down evilly, the claws snatching at us as we stand defenseless, as though to squeeze the youth from us until we are dry and lifeless” (119). Later, when the bombs rain down on her, she knows that they will reach the Witch’s Hand, temporarily quenching its thirst for death. Fittingly, Tosh and The Bug are both buried in the cemetery under the Witch’s Hand, permanent victims of its unrelenting demand for casualties.
She also sees the moon as a symbol of war’s absurdity, and it is a symbol that recurs throughout the course of the novel. The moon is especially absurd because it indicates what Fussell calls the “farcical proximity” (64) of the home and war fronts. The two locations are so close in distance and identical in time, yet they experience entirely different versions of reality. The meaning of the moon evolves with Smithy, depending upon the front she inhabits. The first mention of the moon occurs in the initial bomb raid that kills Tosh. A stretcher-bearer blames the light of the moon for the bomb raid because the light illuminates the bombers’ targets, allowing for greater precision and accuracy, which leads to a greater number of casualties. When Smithy looks at the large, red moon, she thinks, “Somewhere where there isn’t war lovers are walking beneath it, softly beautified by its rays” (152). It is absurd that the same moon that enhances the beauty of lovers also enhances death and destruction.

The second time the moon is mentioned is when Smithy becomes the lover beautified by the moon’s rays. She stands on her doorstep with Roy and reflects upon how the “rays of the summer moon bathe us in gold” (193). On this night, she tries to convince herself that the moon is for the “exclusive use of lovers” (193), attempting to force out the image of the moon as an accessory to death. However, her choice of the word “exclusive” denotes that she is cognizant of other possibilities for the moonlight. She also acknowledges that the moon “should” shine upon them, as if that is the moon’s role on the home front. However, even though Smithy inhabits a geographical sphere that is removed from air raids, her language betrays that she cannot fully forget the purpose of the moon on the war front.

The moon is referenced next during the air raid that kills her fellow WAACs. Smithy explains that there have been nine air raids since the moon has been out in the current month, denoting a correlation between the moon and the death that follows her. On the night that her
friends are killed in a raid, Smithy notices the moon has grown “into a rakish silver ball. She [the moon] is the most aggressively radiant moon I have ever seen….an ideal night for a raid” (232). She equates the silver light of the moon with impending death, and her correlation proves to be correct because she believes she is the only one out of forty people to emerge from the bombing unscathed. However, the moon eventually accompanies her soul’s death at the end of the novel: “Her [Smithy’s] soul died under a radiant silver moon in the spring of 1918 on the side of a blood-spattered trench” (239). The physical, “real” moon is replaced by its theatrical simulacrum, a symbol of the ever-present threat of death. Even though Smithy creates the theater metaphor in attempt to order the random experience of war, her symbols betray that even though she creates meaning through symbolism, she cannot order the chaotic effects of war.

**Theater Metaphor Familiarizes the War to the Home Front**

The theater metaphor is a tool Smithy uses to structure her experiences, but it is also an effort to familiarize the home front with what Travis Martin calls the “unfamiliar, alternate-reality” of the battlefield (2). He notes that in order to make experiences understood, war memoirists “juxtapose what is normal in war’s anti-reality alongside what is normal in peacetime” (3). Smithy uses dramatic tropes to describe the war because the theater was an accessible part of British life. Britain’s residents attended performances, and even within their homes, “charades and amateur theatricals are a convention” (Fussell 198). Smithy places war within a familiar symbol-system so those who cannot experience the war front will be able to apprehend war’s complexities, even if it’s just a glimpse.

The limits of language separate Smithy from the home front, but her experiences are especially unspeakable because people such as Mrs. Smith, her mother, and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, her mother’s friend, refuse to believe the limited truth Smithy manages to
communicate. When Smithy or her sister Trix speak about the war in its actuality, Mrs. Smith brushes off their comments, saying they are “inclined to exaggerate” (31). Margaret Darrow explains the difficult position in which war women were placed because “to reject the mythic war instantly removed the female author from war's universe and left her no ground from which to launch her reevaluation” (100). As a result, Smithy is condemned to reside in what Albrinck calls the “unreal present,” the borderline between reality and unreality (281). No language or familiar trope will guarantee that their voices will be heard, so Smithy fantasizes about actualizing her unreality by showing her experiences to those who doubt her, stripping them of all deniability. She fantasizes about giving her mother and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington a tour of her job which includes sick, maimed, and dead men. She imagines the women vomiting, closing their eyes, and begging to leave. Smithy says, “Wait, wait, I have so much, so much to show you before you return to your committees and your recruiting meetings” (96). She desires a unified existence that is accepted on the home front. Until they accept her experiences, she is what Meg Albrinck calls “unreal” (282). She does not fully exist, much like a character in a play.

Smithy sees men and women on the war front as actors in the tragedy of the Great War, and those on the home front are spectators, entertained by the spectacle and perpetuating its performance. An anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* writer says, “A nation is divided into two parts, one of which talks of war and ordains it, while the other acts and suffers” (qtd. in Fussell 89). This quotation perfectly encompasses the actor and spectator imagery as depicted in *Not So Quiet*. Smithy “acts and suffers” in the war and she never recovers. Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, and politicians are spectators; they have no idea what the war entails. They see the action unfold, but they are not directly involved and are free to look away at any time. Doris Eder, analyzing the gaps that separate the home and war front, the classes, and the
generations, argues that different perspectives on the war create an “unbridgeable gap between combatants and civilians,” leaving the youth “radically alienated” from the other groups (129). Smithy sees her generation as a “race apart, we war product” (167). Smithy finds it ludicrous that while she and other combatants are “pitchforked into hell” (33), the patriots “are comfortable at home and intend to stay there” (135). She explores the absurd attitudes of the spectators:

But what I do not see is pity or understanding for the war-shocked woman who sacrificed her youth on the altar of the war that was not of her making, the war made by age and fought by youth while age looked on and applauded and encored. Will they show us mercy, these arm-chair critics, once our uniforms are frayed and the romance of the war woman is no longer a romance? (166)

Smithy sees the home front as spectators who “applaud” and “encore” for the war, yet they thanklessly criticize those who fight in it, like critics who assign poor reviews to a production. The spectators see the romance of the war, accentuated by pretty uniforms and propaganda.

**Propaganda’s Use of Theater**

Smithy uses the theater metaphor to structure her experiences and familiarize the home front with the war. However, while Smithy works to describe war as a tragedy, propaganda constructs War Myths to further the conception of war as a “romance” (Smith 166). One of propaganda’s primary goals is to shape the way the people on the home front view the war. Propaganda uses theatrical strategies in order to gain support for the war, which (in part) includes prescribing a limited number of roles that the citizens of the home and war front must adopt in order to be accepted in society. Wilshire notes that only semi-consciously, a person “‘casts’
himself into ‘roles’ available in the local environment” (209). Propaganda limits the roles available for people to inhabit, thereby controlling their behaviors and ideologies.

Propaganda draws heavily on what Meg Albrinck calls the “gender scripts” of society. These scripts prescribe the characteristics and behaviors of each gender, and the scripts must “match those [values] deemed acceptable by the state” (272). The state uses gender scripts as regulators of behavior, and people are expected to abide by them as indicators of patriotism. Jane Marcus effectively sums up “polarized” gender expectations: “Men must be potent. Women must be maternal” (252). These expectations dictate people’s actions on both fronts, thereby ensuring that the war will be sustained as long as necessary.

Susan Kent highlights an excerpt from an article in Common Cause from August 14, 1914, that reads: “We want to emphasize the vital part which women have to play in a crisis like the present” (157). The essay motivates women to sew, join committees in charge of distributing clothing, and take ambulance classes. While this language calls forth a sense of duty, the words “play” and “part” also borrow from the language of the theater. The duties that Common Cause encourages are also consistent with “maternal” expectations of the feminine script.

The “heroes” valorized by society are the individuals who “do their bit” (Smith 24), those who adopt one of the four essential characters deemed acceptable by the state: feminine dutiful daughter, courageous combatant son, sacrificing mother, and enthusiastic supporter. Those who abide by the scripts receive social currency for their obedience, and Celia Kingsbury points out that “the desire to conform, to gain social status, informs the patriotic plea” (241). Alternately, those who veer from the script are sought out and reprimanded by society. These reductive characters perpetuate the myth of war as a romance instead of tragedy. Miriam Cooke considers it essential to “avoid repeating the lies of the Homeric war myth,” believing that once the
Homer's lie is exposed, the “myth can begin to approximate reality and that changes can begin to be acknowledged” (177). Smithy expresses frustration with the romantic war myth and seeks to change the conception of war within society.

Smithy and Trix undergo pressure to perpetuate the romantic war myth by following the prescribed role of the dutiful, feminine daughter. In a letter to Smithy, Mrs. Smith emphasizes “how proud [she] is of me and Trix and Bertie. My three heroes, she calls us” (78). They are “heroes” because they “do their bit” for their country (25). However, serving is only half of the expectation; women must maintain their femininity even on the war front. She reprimands Trix for using unfeminine language, emphasizing that “it is for women in France to have a womanly, refining, softening effect on the troops” (80). This gender expectation promotes the idea of war as a romance.

Trix and Smithy both react against the roles they’re supposed to play. Trix comments on the absurdity of the feminine stereotypes, wondering “why the dickens they dress you up in a pretty cap and make you think you’re going to smooth the patient’s fevered brow” (85). Compared to the romantic myths of propaganda, war’s realities are especially absurd. In addition, Trix is so frustrated with being typecast as a dutiful, feminine daughter that she tells Smithy, “If you write me a cheery, brown-haired-lass-in-khaki-doing-her-bit-for-her-country letter, I’ll go mad and bite someone” (81). Trix intentionally subverts the role for which society casts her.

Like Trix, Smithy also points out the disparity between images of propaganda and her experiences. She critiques the postcards of the VAD canteen “in which smiling white-capped VAD’s stand by waiting on the drivers” (53). She describes these women as “photographer’s models,” since none of the VADs in her convoy have ever seen the smiling women depicted in
the postcard. Smithy also points to the flowers portrayed in the center of the table and determines they “must have been hired too” (53). Even the most experienced nurse had never seen flowers in her time. This analysis of the postcard shows the fiction involved in propaganda, highlighted by using words like “models” and “hired” to describe the version of war available to be bought and sent to family and friends.

Mothers are also encouraged to abide by gender scripts as well as offer their children to the war effort, thereby fitting the role of sacrificial mother. An anomaly of the war, according to Peter Buitenhuis, is the shift from mothers as nurturing and caring to willingly sacrificing their children’s lives. He believes this shift is “one of the great successes of Great War propaganda” (13). Alan Simmonds analyzes a popular Parliamentary Recruiting Committee poster that shows a woman speaking to her son with a caption that says, “GO—IT’S YOUR DUTY, LAD” (231). This poster models the role mothers are supposed to play in the war. This role is wholly embraced by Mrs. Smith, who is a pawn of propaganda on the home front. She is pleased to send her children to their death, priding herself that she has three children to sacrifice as opposed to Mrs. Evans-Mawnington, “who only has Roy to give to the country” (78).

The men, also, must abide by the gender script prescribed by society. They must act courageously, and this action, according to Albrinck, includes “fighting, killing, and even dying” for their country (272). The “GO—IT’S YOUR DUTY, LAD” poster is not only directed at mothers, but also at their sons. It’s the “duty” of a “lad” to fight. This advertisement inextricably links political duties and gender, encouraging men and women to contemplate the “maleness” of men who do not fight. This advertisement, in addition to many others, “invite[s] women to question the sexual virility of their men if they refused to volunteer” (Simmonds 231). Roy undergoes pressure from the home front to continue his service, and when he is on leave,
Mrs. Evans-Mawnington advertises that “he’s dying to get back” (187). Even though this is not true, it’s a part he feels like he has to play, the part to placate those on the home front and preserve his masculinity. Ironically, his masculinity is later taken by the war; he is castrated as a result of combat.

Those who resist the scripts, men or women, are sought out and reprimanded by society. Judith Butler posits that gender is a performance, and any assertion that the “feminine” belongs to the female and “masculine” belongs to the male is “improperly installed as an effect of a compulsory system” (“Imitation” 21). Any deviation from the prescribed gender norms “brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (“Imitation” 24). Propaganda thrives on enforcing gender norms because the gender performance is inseparable from the prescribed roles it offers its citizens. *Not So Quiet* certainly demonstrates the social punishment that results from breaking the heterosexual norms and prescribed societal roles.

Mrs. Smith is an active enforcer of gender scripts. Smithy has seen this consequence first-hand. Trix’s letters home sometimes contain vulgar, masculine language, and Mrs. Smith is “shocked beyond words” (80) that Trix is not acting out the same womanly script with which she was raised. Smithy censors her letters home because Mrs. Smith refuses to acknowledge any details that conflict with her wartime ideals. Mrs. Smith is not alone in her perpetuation of prescribed roles and gender norms. When Smithy struggles on her first day of ambulance driving, Tosh recommends she adjust to the conditions of war because while the war is difficult, “it takes twice as much [nerve] to go home to flag-crazy mothers and fathers” (13). The negative repercussions of veering from the scripts would be torturous. Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Evans-Mawnington also ostracize men who don’t fight (and thereby don’t abide by the gender script)
by handing them white feathers which signify cowardice, intending to shame them into action (34, 96).

Mrs. Evans-Mawnington hopes to shame eligible civilians into action by using Roy and his medals of heroism as an object lesson. She looks to Shakespeare’s *Henry V* as a source for shaming, hoping that Roy, like the men fighting alongside King Henry V on Saint Crispin’s day, will shame those who choose not to fight in the Great War. She hopes that when those who avoid the war look upon Roy, they should “hold their manhood cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us” (4.3.65-66). According to Alan Simmonds, the popularity of *Henry V* surged in British theatre. Plays antithetical to the war were censored, and *Henry V* was “revived and performed to packed houses” (274). King Harry’s speech, “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers” aptly fit with the outmatched English soldiers in France in 1914. Propaganda dominated the theater, providing “no shortage of opportunity to wave the flag” (274).

The British saw their ownership of Shakespeare as a “major national asset” (Fussell 197), but the Germans also adopted Shakespeare in a similar way. According to Balz Enlger, German author Rudolf Brotanek found that the motivations of the Germans in WWI fit flawlessly with the principles upheld in *Richard III*. These principles are “the feeling of fellowship with the people and of responsibility towards God” (103). Brotanek explains that the Germans identified with the “victor at Bosworth” and, before they entered battles, prayed:

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O thou, whose captain I account myself,
Look on my forces with a gracious eye. […]
Make us they ministers of chastisement,
That we may praise thee in victory. (5.5.61-7)
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Shakespeare, too, can be twisted and manipulated as easily as language has been twisted to rationalize multiple perspectives of war.

**Smithy Challenges Propaganda’s Prescribed Roles**

Smithy resists war myths and gender scripts by writing a new play set in wartime. Camilla Lowe also recognizes Smithy’s indictment, stating that she “chose the pen as a weapon” in challenging the propaganda materials as well as the “narratives inscribed in the framework of the traditional, masculinized ‘War Story’” (127). Smithy, instead, tells a new story, recasting the traditional roles.

For example, while propaganda’s gender scripts would point out Tosh’s faults, Smithy sees her as an obvious heroine. On the home front Albrinck says one becomes a hero by “performing the female script,” which entails mothering, giving up their children, and surrendering to protection (272). Tosh becomes the “idol of the entire convoy” (11) by challenging this script. She swears like a soldier, smokes, disregards the need for the approval of others, and cuts her hair short like a man. After she cuts her hair, the B.F. challenges her gender by calling her “awfully unsexed,” but Tosh points to biology, her “breasts of a nursing mother,” to prove her femininity. Tosh is to Smithy what Zenna is to Mrs. Smith, and the paradigm shift is clear.

When Tosh cuts her hair, Skinny says, “You look like a Shakespearean page, Tosh, or Rosalind” (22). Many female heroines in Shakespeare have short hair, including Rosalind, Portia, Nerissa, and Viola. These Shakespearean characters are also strong, independent women who create their own characters outside of social norms. Rosalind, from *As You Like It*, is a female heroine. David Bevington describes Rosalind as “the realistic one, the plucky Shakespearean heroine showing her mettle in the world of men” (296). This allusion is
appropriate because to the girls in the convoy, Tosh is a heroine because of her brashness and bold, anti-patriotic sentiments.

Tosh also gives an inspirational speech to the women of the convoy in the same vein as Shakespeare’s war histories. However, she does so ironically. She riles up the women, who “shout” and “yell with joy” (107) in response to her anti-patriotic sentiments and anti-battle cries. She assures the women that the B.F., who is leaving for England, cannot be blamed for the lack of men in the area “bursting with love…of country” (107). Her speech sounds deceptively patriotic, to the degree that the B.F. has no idea that Tosh speaks in jest. In this speech, Tosh also misquotes Shakespeare for her own ironic purposes, much like the propaganda of the time. She refers to the “pioneer spirit” and the willingness of women to “do their bit” as “of such stuff the women of England are made” (107). This line is a parody of Prospero’s speech in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” (4.1.156-157). This line notes the transient nature of human life, but Tosh adopts it, ironically, to mock patriots like The B.F. Tosh’s death is especially tragic because she is the “the brave, the splendid, the great-hearted” (160). Her death reinforces the point that the war is an unquestionable tragedy.

Smithy also challenges the role of antagonist seen in propaganda literature. The enemies are typically the Germans, and many atrocities of war were subscribed to them by propaganda (Kent 158). Smithy, however, rewrites the parts, and the role of antagonist is filled by mothers, the Commandant, and the politicians, people staged as protagonists in propaganda’s theater of war. Mrs. Smith represents a dangerous oppositional figure because her ideals perpetuate wars. Albrinck sees Smithy’s mother as “a truer enemy than the Germans in this text,” and describes Smithy’s relationship with her mother as “hostile” and “openly antagonistic” (286). Mrs. Smith frequently repeats propaganda’s phrases, like “A war to end all wars” (90) and “doing your bit”
(31). She is dangerous because she is an easily-manipulated pawn that would support any future war, as long as there were social benefits and catchy mantras. She sacrifices her children for duty’s sake, takes pride in their deaths, and wears Trix’s medals on special occasions, just as she is taught by propaganda. The answer to Smithy’s question as to whether the “arm-chair critics” will sympathize with the combatants once the “uniforms are frayed” is answered by Mrs. Smith when Smithy returns home from the war after Tosh’s death. Her uniform is worn and blood-stained, yet her mother views it as a “badge of honour” (180), and she encourages Smithy to wear it to a recruiting meeting. For Mrs. Smith, the war-torn uniform is merely a prop used for maintaining public appearances and acquiring social status through the conduit of war. She is happy to play the part society selects for her, especially since her social status increases as a result.

The B.F. plays a similar villain, using the war as a tool to increase her social status. She uses Tosh’s death to gain attention and accolades for her service. She adheres flawlessly to the feminine script, and she concerns herself with appearance as much as Mrs. Smith. Smithy thinks, at first, she is ignorant and harmless, but she gradually learns how harmful ignorance can be. She is the most dangerous villain because she risks transferring the patriotic attitudes resulting from propaganda to the next generation. The B.F. sorely misrepresents Tosh and the activities of her unit, living up to her original nickname, “the bloody fool” (74).

Mrs. Bitch’s surface-level role as an antagonist is obvious—she punishes the girls for being late, even if their tardiness is due to necessities of the job. She makes them clean her ambulance and the bathrooms, limits the hot cocoa ration for no reason, and makes them miserable by sorting the mail exceptionally slowly. However, Mrs. Bitch is the least threatening, most complex antagonist. She uses her authority to strengthen the girls in her unit so they
become more efficient at saving lives. Mrs. Bitch is an especially ironic antagonist because she represents what Smithy ultimately becomes. Smithy says, “Like all efficient machines, she has no humanity” (49). Smithy, also, becomes an efficient machine, void of humanity. When Smithy sees others’ illnesses, she no longer responds with empathy, much like Mrs. Bitch. However, Mrs. Bitch is not the worst character she could emulate.

Smithy’s Theatrical Construction of Identity

Smithy’s own role in her rewritten tragedy is ambiguous at best. She sees herself in the Great War drama as an actress who can inhabit an infinite number of roles, depending upon what is required of the circumstances. Self-characterization becomes a tool necessary for her own survival. Fussell notes that appropriating a character in wartime “provides an escape” so the participant can “perform his duties without implicating his ‘real’ self” (192). However, Smithy adopts so many different roles to aid her own survival that she doesn’t preserve her “real” identity; instead, she inhabits and abandons these roles to such a degree that her identity becomes fragmented and she eventually loses her humanity. She plays “Smithy, ambulance driver” (176), “Smithy,” “Miss Smith of Wimbledon Common/West Kensington” (176) “Smithy, assistant cook” (216), “Z” (16), “Nellie,” (152), “Nell” (187), and automaton.

“Miss Smith of West Kensington” is the young woman who first arrives in the VAD convoy (176). However, after her first night as an ambulance driver, Miss Smith reacts to her gruesome duties by fainting and vomiting. Tosh warns her that war is no place for a “bloody West Kensington lady” (12). The Smith that first appears as an ambulance driver is like a character lost in the wrong play. She is a misfit that would never survive the conditions of war, so she needs to adapt, to rewrite her own character. Smith reflects on her first experiences, saying, “My nerves were all on edge, and the first ghastly glimpse of blood and shattered men
sent me completely to pieces” (11). The Smith that arrived from West Kensington split
“completely to pieces” and evolved into the stronger, more courageous “Smithy” who survives
her first night without running home in shame (12).

Smithy continues to adapt out of necessity. She completes runs without retching or
feeling faint and her stomach makes progress toward adjusting to the food (10). When Tosh cuts
her hair and points out a swarm of lice on the newspaper, Smithy continues eating her ginger
biscuits, unfazed. She acknowledges that “a few weeks ago we should have vomited. But after
cleaning the inside of an ambulance it would take more than a few lice to make our gorges rise”
(14). The new Smithy could not only tolerate, but appreciate vulgarities such as Tosh’s crude
war alphabet. Smithy’s increasing tolerance reflects her strengthening resolve.

Smithy physically adapts to her new environment, and she also undergoes a rapid
transformation of her personality:

Not long ago I was a gentle and pliable creature of no particular virtues or vices,
my temper was even, my nature amiable, and my emotions practically non-
existent. Now I am a sullen, smouldering thing, liable to burst Vesuvian fashion
into a flaming fire of rage without the slightest warning. (47)

Smithy acknowledges that the vast changes in her personality occur over a short period of time.
She adjusts to the sordid nature of war in “a few weeks” (14), and her identity as the gentle,
nondescript Miss Smith was “not long ago” (47). The imagery of her Vesuvius-like rage
contrasts her identity as a proper young woman of privileged upbringing. Smithy’s rage is
mostly channeled toward the “flag-waggers” back home and The Commandant, both of whom
Smithy sees as vile antagonists. Smithy, once so placid, dreams of confronting the Commandant,
whom she will “murder slowly and reverently and very painfully” (39). While part of Smithy’s
identity is certainly apt to change after being inundated with traumatic images, she struggles with rectifying her actions with the fear she feels inwardly.

Smithy’s use of language belonging to the theater notes that her alterations in identity are more performative than transformative. She acknowledges that bravery needs to be summoned to perform her duties, so she acts brave to cover up the cowardice she feels inside. Smithy admires the women around her who “fortify themselves” and “grow hardened” to suffering and death, but she does not believe she is among them (89). She condemns herself as a “rank coward” at the core, and she has merely “schooled herself” to tolerate atrocities, blood, and vomit (89). Her brave face is a performance dictated by necessity. She struggles with rectifying the internal coward with her external actions; she is frustrated with being termed a “heroine, one of England’s Splendid Women,” when in reality she believes she is “white-livered” and a “weak, suburban coward” (34). The disparity between her performance and internal emotions causes identity fragmentation throughout the novel.

Although Smithy has evolved from the “bloody West Kensington lady” into “Smith, ambulance driver,” she still holds on to a persona known as “Z,” her middle initial, when she interacts with her parents and Aunt Helen. Her middle name, Zenna, is derived from the heroine of a book her mother read before Smithy was born, and Smithy acknowledges that her mother “wanted me to grow up like Z. Z was the paragon of beauty, virtue, and womanliness” (16). Her mother expects that because Smithy shares a namesake with this character, she will share her personality traits as well. Smithy does not naturally possess these characteristics, particularly womanliness, so she merely acts the part for her mother’s sake. She does everything she can to preserve her mother’s image of her as a “wee curly head” walking “demurely” to Sunday school (16). When Tosh cuts her hair, although Smithy is envious of the practicality and empowering
freedom of the hair style, she refuses to cut her hair because it would put a “tin helmet on the
womanliness” (16). Smithy cannot part from the role of Z at the beginning of the war because
she does not want to disappoint her mother. Smithy must play the part of Smithy and Z
simultaneously to preserve both identities.

After she plays “Z” in her letters, Smithy reacts viscerally and counteracts this role by
spewing pages of imaginary conversations in which Smithy shows her mother the truth about the
war’s violence. She thinks if her mother knew the truth, the need for the role of Z would be
eliminated, and Smithy’s identity would become less polarized. Z deteriorates as the novel
progresses because under the extreme circumstances of the war, according to Kingsbury,
“Smithy’s gentility becomes ludicrous” (240). When Smithy finally cuts her hair, she annihilates
the last remaining dregs of Z.

In moments of extreme duress, Smithy’s characters collide, highlighting the dissociative
and fragmented pieces of her identity. Carol Acton writes on the identity and gender
fragmentation seen commonly in WWI novels, particularly those written by nurses. Nurses must
maintain professional composure in the midst of emotional hysteria, which leads to
complications in identity (65). In addition, nurses are both “witnesses and participants in the
combatant trauma of injury,” which further complicates their position in relation to traumatic
images (65). Acton attributes psychological survival to a “severing” between the observer of the
image and the individual who feels (67).

Throughout the novel, Smithy attempts to separate the personal from the professional.
When she hears artillery fire in her convoy, she and the other women “fit them into the back of
our subconscious minds and forget them” (28). This demonstrates a conscious
compartmentalization of her different selves. However, this compartmentalizing of multiple
consciousness also has psychological detriments, as the individual and observer cannot remain separated forever. In moments of extreme duress, the compartmentalization of identity becomes impossible, and her conflicting identities collide, creating psychological confusion. When she drives injured men in a snowstorm, their pain and screaming stimulate her emotions and threaten to combine the personal and professional. Several characters emerge at once, and they contribute three separate dialogues to her thoughts. She debates whether or not to investigate the cause of the men’s screaming in the back of the ambulance, thinking contradictory thoughts such as, “I couldn’t do it,” “I must go on,” “go and see,” and “I will not go and see” (100). Her thoughts are also separated by ellipses, implying the presence of additional content that cannot be articulated.

At the same time Smithy struggles with whether or not to check on the men, “Miss Smith of Wimbledon Common” breaks through under the utility of escapism. She hopes to disengage the personal from the traumatic scene by fantasizing about her days of pre-war innocence. She juxtaposes images of her coming-out dance with the reality of writhing and injured men. She says, “Was it a scream? …My hair up for the first time…oh, God, a scream this time…my hair up in little rolls at the back…another scream—the madman has started, the madman had started. I was afraid of him” (98). She thinks of home until she is unable to block out the screams of the injured any longer, and she is wrenched back into her reality as an ambulance driver.

Another incident of fragmented consciousness occurs in the bombing raid that kills Tosh. The present moment for Smithy is so absurd that it doesn’t seem real. She becomes a spectator, watching her own scene unfold before her. Fussell says that soldiers can feel like spectators “especially during moments of heightened anxiety when one is ‘beside oneself’” (192). Smithy reflects on her multiple perspectives, thinking, “I am watching myself from a distance, suspended in mid-air over the radiator front. Look, that’s Nellie Smith sitting there—that white
blob of a face with terrified eyes, that’s Nellie Smith” (151). She refers to herself in third person and watches from above. Acton notes that the result of a traumatic witnessing is “a dislocation of the self as subject into self as object” (68). This split is an instrument of psychological coping, but the division between participant and observer cannot last. Later, she takes a drink of brandy and immediately regrets it because she becomes grounded in the actual experience. She says, “Why did I drink that brandy? It was easier when I could watch myself” (153). While separating her consciousness into different “parts” temporarily helps her cope with the realities of war, she cannot maintain the separation, and she subjects herself to extreme self-fragmentation.

A major turning point in Smithy’s identity occurs after Tosh is killed in a bombing raid. Smithy returns home, telling herself that “I am no longer Smith, ambulance driver, but Miss Smith, of Wimbledon common” (176). She finds respite in the miles of the Atlantic that separate her from her wartime persona. She enjoys the luxuries of home life such as her own room, a warm breakfast, and a soft pillow, believing that she is slowly “becoming normal” again (176), insisting that she has “finished the war for good” (182). She burns her uniform that is stained with Tosh’s blood, refusing her mother’s request to resurrect Helen Z or any of her previous wartime identities.

When she is home, she experiments with more identities as a spectator of war. She becomes “Nell,” a woman interested in marrying Roy Evans-Mawnington, a soldier who understands her past experiences, yet whose wholeness offers her hope for the future. Roy and Smithy convince themselves they have fallen in love with one another; ironically, their first date takes place in a theater. She says, “The theater is jolly—a revue, lights, music, fun, pretty girls, but to us it’s merely a background” (190). Since Roy and Nell are so adept at assuming roles
based on circumstance, they assume the roles of two young people who are madly in love. They construct their own future set through their imagination, which includes a green front door, a white piano, a garden, and a nursery. They invent innocent lives they know they can never live and at the end of the night, “the romance ends on a note of farce…just like a comic paper” (193). Fittingly, their date begins and ends in fiction, and their love and conversation are largely based on fantasy. They have become so adept at playing their roles that it becomes hard to differentiate, even to themselves, when they are acting or living. Nell repeatedly convinces herself that she has found love in “the sweetness of a play-mate,” Roy (193).

Terming Roy her “play-mate” is fitting because Roy and Smithy’s relationship is based on the mutual understanding of the war and the commonality of playing different roles in front of different people. He plays a persona similar to Z; he is the “clean English boy type” (146) and when he comes back from the war, he “[goes] everywhere with his mother in uniform to please her” (181). However, when Roy’s mother speaks about the pride associated with his service and how he is anxious to get back, he and Nell exchange knowing looks. When they speak privately, Roy says, “Aren’t the parents bloodthirsty? The way I’ve got to pretend I’m the little hero, Nell” (189). He merely plays the role of dutiful son and soldier when in reality, he does all he can to avoid the trenches.

“Nell,” however, is not a permanent identity change. Soon after Roy’s departure, Smithy learns that she must re-enlist in the war in order to help Trix finance an abortion. She joins the WAACS as an assistant cook, which requires yet another persona: “Smithy, assistant cook” (216). This role is similar to Smithy, the VAD, although the humanity has seeped out of her. Smithy, the assistant cook is much more automatized—she fulfills her duties mechanically. She understands the daily schedule and abides by it flawlessly. She sees herself as “a slot machine
that never goes out of order,” and she takes comfort in her highly regulated life, calling the administration “perfect” due to its ability to regulate her emotions. She is neither happy nor unhappy, which directly contrasts her Vesuvius-like emotions when she was a VAD.

Even Smithy’s relationships are mechanical. The other women like her because she is “always the same” (215). They crave the influence of Smithy’s constancy, so she acts as a stable support for her colleagues. She speaks with them “automatically” (217), as though maintaining relationships is another duty on her agenda. Smithy’s identity is, once again, fragmented as she notices the disparity between the outward identity she performs and the inward identity she feels. Kingsbury notes that the WAACS are a “working class unit” and when she takes this position, her “life is virtually over” (236). While Smithy acts the role of assistant cook, she sees herself as “a flesh and blood case containing nothing save the machinery that keeps Smith, assistant cook, alive” (217). This quotation shows the degree of fragmentations Smithy progressively undergoes throughout the novel. Her identity as machine acting underneath “assistant cook” is doubly removed from her identity as the “real” Smithy. Baudrillard discusses how the simulacra can be “metastable” and “programmatic” (2), and here, Smithy literally programs her own unreal identity.

The final product of Smithy’s fragmented identity is seen at the end of the novel when Smithy’s trench is bombed, causing the death and severe injury of many of her friends in her unit. She is unable to separate the personal from the professional when she is bombarded with the images that represent the personalities of her friends: Blimey’s Burberry coat, Misery’s crochet blanket, and the recognizable limbs that she can match to each girl. Smithy does not allow herself to react emotionally to death or chaos and is convinced she has “never felt less hysterical in my life” (239). Smithy’s personas allow her to survive because the death around
her ceases to make her feel, but she has lost her “real” self as a casualty in the process, convinced that her “soul died” (239), an indicator of shellshock.

**Smithy’s Gender as Costume**

Smithy’s gender is not a solidified identity, but it is a role she inhabits based on the circumstance. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler compares the acts of gender performance to “performative acts within theatrical contexts” (521). Since Smithy sees her identity as a theatrical performance, her gender is similarly performative; gender only supplements her performance within her aforementioned roles. Performing gender is similar to donning a costume and can change drastically depending on which role she chooses to inhabit. At times, she challenges propaganda’s scripts, and other times, she abides by the prescribed script flawlessly and delights in doing so. Aranzazu Usandizaga posits that gender is imperative to the construction of identity and “in the context of war gender becomes radically performative” (xvii). Gender and identity are intimately related, and Smithy’s fluid gender performance indicates the “map” of her identity has been replaced so many times that the “real” no longer remains. Her identity becomes more complicated and fragmented as a result of gender performance.

When Smithy is at home, she plays Z or Nell, and both of these roles adhere to the traditional feminine script. The feminine Smithy was, according to Kingsbury, “bred for little more than drawing room prattle” (236), and prattle is absurdly incongruent with the demands of the war. Albrinck sees that the longer Smithy serves near the war front in the midst of pain and death, the more irrelevant the feminine script becomes (280). On the war front, gender is not a binary opposition, but a fluid performance based on the tasks required of them, and Marcus asserts that “gender oppositions must be negotiated for survival” (269). As Smithy performs masculine tasks, she identifies with the masculine.
The tasks Smithy performs are typically associated with the male script, and Smithy herself even calls her duties “men’s work” (10). They must drive at night in perilous conditions, overcome any fear or discomfort with the dark, and tolerate loads of maimed men without complaint. Marcus states that in performing these actions, “Self-reliance, courage, nerve, and bravery must be summoned, and these are characteristics typically associated with men in wartime (269). In addition, Albrinck points out that Smithy “smokes…, swears, and sleeps with a stranger,” which are characteristics subscribed to men (284). Smithy is also prevented from feminine behavior of showing emotion or sentimentality because Mrs. Bitch’s strict regimen only allows for performing duties.

Smithy intentionally veers from the genders script when she cuts her hair. She knows how her mother will react to her short hair and she considers the effect her haircut will have on “Mother’s story of me and Trix” (147), presumably the story of the girls standing outside Wimbledon Commons with their curly hair and Sunday best. By invoking this story, Smithy knowingly departs from the role of “Helen Z,” the version of herself she preserved for her mother’s sake. She also considers the impact of her haircut on male suitors, such as Baynton, who she meets on a field trip with Tosh. Finally, she acknowledges that the short haircut will never be popular in mainstream culture because women “will never adopt a mode that isn’t essentially feminine” (148). Smithy realizes cutting her hair would depart from the gender script, thinks about it for weeks, and intentionally acts against it.

Albrinck posits that Smithy alters her appearance to align herself with masculinity, thereby allowing herself to gain power in a patriarchal world (285). However, on the war front, Smithy is in no position to gain power due to gender performance. In fact, she doesn’t see women as being subordinate to men, but she equalizes them. War has taught her that women are
capable of doing traditional man’s work. For example, when she begins to warm up after a cold night, she thinks, “God bless the man who invented the hot-water bottles. Or was it a woman?...I don’t know” (45). Her involvement in the masculine sphere has caused her to rethink her preconceived gender assumptions. In addition, she doesn’t see men as elevated above her. Instead, she wonders “Are they as cold and unhappy and homesick as I am? I can hardly believe it possible” (44). Smithy sees her work as just as difficult as theirs, if not more so. There is no advantage to identifying herself with the masculine because they experience similar hardships. Instead, the reason she cuts her hair is that it is the practical thing to do. “Filth and worry” come with long hair, so she controls some of the chaos of war by cutting it (148). Similarly, Tosh doesn’t cut her hair to challenge gender expectations in war; she cuts it to control the lice infestation.

Smithy doesn’t choose a permanent masculine identity when she cuts her hair; her masculinity can be inhabited and abandoned, just like her other roles. For example, when she returns home after Tosh’s death, she determines that she is again “becoming normal,” and she vacillates back to the feminine gender script. She realizes that when she is home, as “Miss Smith, of Wimbledon Common” (176), she delights in silk nightgowns, soft pillows, and scented sheets. She agrees to go out with Roy, and she adopts a traditionally feminine persona. They fantasize about furnishing their cottage with a “white piano,” “green-leafed chintz,” and a garden with a “perambulator on the lawn” (192). Smithy slips into the script of wife and mother when she is with Roy because it is the furthest thing removed from the war that she can imagine. She acts the role of a society woman simply because she is in society. When she returns to service in the WAACs, she abandons the feminine script once again and when Roy is wounded, she assures him she never wanted kids anyway. Smithy’s gender is fluid, depending wholly on what her
circumstances require. Her performance further contributes to her identity fragmentation and the displacement of her “real” self.

The language of theater permeates Smith’s text, functioning in many different ways. First, the trope serves Smithy because she can try to make sense of her chaotic experiences by placing them in the context of the theater. She sees herself as a character in a play who can take on many roles, but the metaphor fails to protect her, as indicated by the death of her soul at the end of the memoir. The theater metaphor is also a way to communicate her experiences to the home front by using language that is familiar to their home front experiences. However, Acton states that no “textual representation” is able to “mediate the gulf” between the observer and the reader, so the metaphor also fails its purpose of representation (64). Next, Smithy exposes the common War Myths in England and challenges those myths by recasting and reinterpreting the parts in the War Story scripted by propaganda. However, the theater metaphor becomes a simulacra that replaces reality, and as a result, her identity is fragmented, her gender is associated with performance, and she remains part of a generation separated from all who came before, “helpless to make [their] immature voices heard” (165).
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