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Riveters, Radicals and Suffragettes: Women in the First World War

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### Mechanization of Men: Soldiers of the British War Machine

One of the most creative pieces of propaganda used by the British government during World War I was a glorified depiction of war. Despite steadily increasing conscription and volunteerism (designed to create the illusion of individual agency) of wide-eyed young men in exchange for the possibility of honor, the reality that lay behind the shimmering veil of gunfire was praise for the detachment of the mind from the body, and the soul from humanity. In this way, the war office exalted the fulfillment of imperial conquest, dragging the men along with them. Considering a passage from Pat Barker's *The Eye in the Door* beside Siegfried Sassoon's "A Soldier's Declaration" exposes the British war machine's successful attempt to ingrain new ideology into their recruits because of the false premise of personal agency.

Pat Barker's fictional Captain Charles Manning earned a powerful position among his colleagues after years of volunteered service. However, because of his occupation, he spends a significant amount of time in therapy to heal from the trauma that the constructed social honor of military leadership has inflicted upon him. Manning's experience with the horrors of war extends beyond his front-line service, as he now serves as a supervising officer in command of training new recruits. The internalization of values offered by the war office is facilitated by the endless repetition afforded by his teaching position. Manning is essentially in charge of a pseudo-patriarchal lineage of knowledge, as the recruits are transitioned seamlessly from the glorified propaganda of daily life and into his care and tutelage as students of combat. Recruits

see Manning as a hero because to them, he is the fulfillment of everything they strive to attain through military service: honor, status, patriotism. They are willing, perhaps unknowingly, to proceed without question, brainwashed by his glow. However, when one soldier arrives and doesn't assimilate as quickly as others fed by the same stream of propaganda, it creates problems for the well-oiled British war machine. In this therapeutic session, Manning discusses with Dr. Rivers one particularly naïve and ill-suited soldier, Scudder. Through Manning's eyes:

I thought he was clumsy. And then after this talk I watched him, I watched him at bayonet practice, running and lunging, and... missing. You know, the thing's this big, and he was missing it. And suddenly I realized it was nothing to do with clumsiness. He couldn't switch off. he couldn't...turn off the part of him that minded. I'm quite certain when he finally got the bayonet in, he saw it bleed. And that's the opposite of what should be happening. You know I saw men once, in close combat, as the manuals say, and one man was reciting the instructions. Lunge, one, two: twist, one, two, out, one, two...Literally killing by numbers. And that's the way it has to be. And if a man's properly trained, he'll function almost like an automaton. And Scudder was the opposite of that. Somehow the whole thing had gone in reverse. (Barker 171)

Manning, in a position of power, is stricken by the idea that a prospective soldier may struggle to turn off his emotions and fight as effectively as other conscripted men can. These more practiced soldiers function only by "killing by numbers," dissociating from their current situation as a means of survival (Barker 171). Moreover, dissociation as a method of self-preservation is a clinical cycle that appears throughout and across companies of soldiers and is continually treated by the war offices as an occupational hazard of service and not a pressing medical indicator of the psychological damage the war inflicts. Because Scudder's apparent worthlessness as a soldier is manifested in his inability to separate himself from his own humanity, Manning also

serves as a mouthpiece for the ideology of the war machine. His inability to sympathize with Scudder's squeamishness reveals government priorities. In other words, the British government values war politics over any resulting psychological damage inflicted upon the men who fight in the war. Manning was successfully able to detach himself from battlefield horrors, once again revealing the success of the degenerative, but preservative dissociation, but his criticism of Scudder voices an internalized value in detachment which is characteristic of his status as an officer. The war office rewarded Manning with his position because of his ability to dissociate. Because his entire livelihood depends upon this power of dissociation, it is only natural that he views emotions that interfere with a soldier's ability to function as an inconvenience. The very best soldiers in the empire are the ones who can separate from their natural inclination toward emotional connection in order to carry out the wishes of the war machine to which they answer, and this very principle is manifested in Captain Manning.

Later, Manning discusses the ideal soldier: when trained properly, he functions not as a man, but as a machine. This human mechanization of war emphasizes a total retreat from the humanity of a moral society at peace. Manning implies that what he (as the voice of the war) values most in a *soldier* (yet, interestingly not in a man) is his ability to depart from a distinctly empathetic human consciousness to become nothing more than a mechanized shell. Manning's job is to feed the glorified ideas about service to innocent men and create the necessary collective consciousness which functions on command. In Britain's war, the value of a man was defined by the number that forms a battalion; the value of a soldier is placed in how many soldiers he can kill, even if he must "recit[e] the instructions" to become such an "automaton" (Barker 171). The title of "soldier" became more valuable than those of typical society in the eyes of the government because the focus from above is centered on performance by pawns on a deadly chessboard rather than the life and welfare of living, breathing men.

If one is to investigate the lives of British game-piece-soldiers, one must consider the life and word of Siegfried Sassoon, himself a testament to the very nature and draw of the war. Sassoon argues the merits of war through the parallel expression of men and the mindless automatons which are fashioned from them. At the first announcement of a draft, Sassoon immediately volunteered himself for service, and despite personal loss, injury and trauma, he returned unflinchingly to active duty. Sassoon's "A Soldier's Declaration" stands resolute against his fascinating history of armed loyalty as he opens: "...I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers..." (Sassoon 1). Pleading for the end of the war, Sassoon calls attention to his concerns by claiming to act on behalf of other soldiers. Considering this statement beside his dichotomous titles, (for instance, Officer and Antiwar Poet) Sassoon identifies with the fighting populace even from outside of the war, a striking parallel to Captain Manning's loyalty to training ideology. In this way, Sassoon's sense of personal identity becomes inseparable from his wartime persona. In order to become an official, Sassoon would have had to complete, even excel in, the mechanized training described previously by Manning. Whether Sassoon was then more comparable to Manning or Scudder as a recruit, the audience is not made explicitly aware, but consider the following. Sassoon's dissociation stemmed from harrowing realities of the war, and his soldier's status becomes his single identity, indicating an inclination toward Manning. The perceived agency of active duty stole his humanity, forcing him to return to a disillusioned sense of purpose instilled in him by the ideology of the war he was forced to absorb. Sassoon acts as a mouthpiece not only for his adopted brotherhood, but also as the paradigm soldier that the war effort aimed to create, yet ironically could not contain. As evidenced by the embedded ideology of his statement, Sassoon, as a model creation of the war effort (a volunteer victim of

the paradox perpetrated by propaganda) is more concerned with the maintenance of the honor of a war than the psychological salvation of his fellow men despite his identification with them.

Though Sassoon claims to act on behalf of his fellow soldiers, one must consider how he focuses his argument for ending the war and a second paradox it forces the reader to note. As a soldier who witnessed the atrocities of new warfare pioneered during World War I, Sassoon's argument for the end of the war takes on a new dimension: "I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed" (Sassoon 1). Curiously enough, Sassoon argues for the end of the war not because of the psychological damage that a prolonged war (and perhaps synonymously that dissociation) inflicts upon the men who fight it, but because the politics of the war turned unjust. Sassoon is ultimately a pawn and victim of the war machine, and his statement is indicative of the internalized propaganda which cultivates a state of complete compliance: it is a great honor to serve, and the government's justification of war should not be questioned before threatening that honor of service. It is his duty and honor to serve as a soldier in the British army, (as substantiated by the atmosphere of propaganda) and to indicate flaws in strategic efficiency. As a device of the war effort, he is trained to see the tactical errors over those concerning morality. The very real Sassoon is arguably as thoughtfully crafted a soldier as the ones fictionally cultivated by Barker in the instance of Captain Manning and his students, because, as a soldier, he identifies with the war effort more than peacetime society. In making this judgement, he executes the precise duty that he was "created for:" he is a mouthpiece for the war effort. If his statement objective wrong done by the war office in the case of the psychological abuse of soldiers caused by the preservative dissociation, his statement of open defiance could have been more worthy in title because the government had previously depicted the war effort as a glorious honor for men. It is this false depiction of service as an honor which continued to draw on the

desires of recognition from young recruits just as quickly as the war machine ideology could be fed to them, and its violence destroy them.

The notion of blind obedience as an irrefutable component of collective consciousness is based on both Sassoon's and Manning's implicit arguments directly addressing questions regarding direct defiance of the war machine. Pat Barker's text answers in the representative example of the "Scudder Anomaly." In Manning's flawless process of converting naïve recruits into trained weapons for Britain's war, Scudder threatens the scene with his inability to dissociate, maintaining his emotional connection to normal society. Scudder cannot function at the expected standard of aggression, and the solution to his condition is isolated punishment. He is a threat to the war machine and is sent to a war tribunal where the result is a punishment meant to reinforce and instill the appropriate ideology. Manning reflects, "I don't think it helped...in the end it's the men who keep you going...somehow the whole thing had gone in reverse" (Barker 171). If the objective of punishment is to remove the man from body, then why would the man be removed from the environment in which others have succeeded in separating themselves? Perhaps because of his ability to question the mechanisms that turned friends into automatons, the leaders of the training recognized the danger he posed to their well refined system and aimed to destroy it. To the war trained eye of an official like Manning, who perhaps is so great a testament to the success of British war training that he doesn't recognize that his instincts are now governed by that ingrained ideology, sacrificing one is more important to the preservation of many. As an anomaly to the process, Scudder would have been removed because he poses a threat to the proper function of the creation of shells in showing them that there is a possibility to see wrong within the propagandized glory of war, breaking the cycle of dazed compliance to the war machine. Though this complex detail is omitted from Sassoon's observance, it is possible that it is so because he himself had failed to notice the "Scudder

Anomaly” in his own company, indicating another proverbial “success” of the war machine in his training. The mob mentality of training keeps pawns of war, like Manning and Sassoon, in line with the agenda of the war: unquestioning and submissive.

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## “The Eye in the Door” By Pat Barker Passage Transcription

Manning laughed. “The thing was he was extremely bright. And I don’t know whether it was snobbery or...or what it was, but I’d been assuming he wasn’t. Actually, I don’t think it was snobbery, it was just he was so bloody bad at everything. You couldn’t believe there was an intelligent mind behind all those...cock-ups. But there was/. His expression became momentarily remote. “After that, I noticed him more. I thought -”

“What did he get?”

“At the court martial? Two hours’ field punishment a day. When everybody else was resting - uh! - he’d be cleaning limbers, that sort of thing. I used to stop and have a word with him. I don’t think it helped because it took him away from the other men and in the end it’s the other men who keep you going.”

“Go on. You said you thought-”

“I thought he was clumsy. And then after this talk I watched him, I watched him at bayonet practice, running in and lunging and...missing. You know, the thing’s this big and he was missing it. And suddenly I realized it was nothing to do with clumsiness. He couldn’t switch off. He couldn’t...turn off the part of himself that minded. I’m quite certain when he finally got the bayonet in, he saw it bleed. And that the opposite of what should be happening. You know I saw men once...in close combat, as the manuals say, and one man was reciting the instructions. Lunge, one two: twist, one, two, out, one, two...Literally killing by numbers. And that’s the way it has to be. And if a man’s properly trained he’ll function on the day almost like an automaton. And Scudder was the opposite of that. Somehow the whole thing had gone in reverse. I think probably because of the breakdown, because I can see the same thing happening to me. Like red - the color red - whatever it is, even if it’s a flower or a book - it’s always blood.”

Rivers had gone very still. He waited.

“When I was out there, I could be in blood up to the elbows, it didn’t bother me. It’s almost as if instead of normal feelings being cut off, there aren’t any divisions left at all. Everything washes into everything else. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“A Soldier’s Declaration” By Siegfried Sassoon Transcription

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this was, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purpose for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this was should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now, I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also, I believe that I may help to destroy the callous compliance with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.