

# **Tommy Atkins:**

Brother, “Mother,” and Lover.

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“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother.”<sup>1</sup> The sentiment conveyed by Henry V’s Crispin’s Day speech is one that evokes a sense of friendship and camaraderie between soldiers; it is an attempt to rally the troops, bolster morale and solidify the bond between fellow soldiers. Shakespeare’s view of male-male relationships, however, cannot necessarily be applied to the bonds formed between comrades-at-arms during the First World War.<sup>2</sup> As modern warfare rendered obsolete the Victorian paradigm of masculinity, relationships and roles were moulded to fit the unique, unfamiliar situations soldiers faced in the trenches. The shifts in interpersonal relations between British soldiers during the Great War included new roles such as comrade, nurturing mother figure and object of sexual desire.

In order to properly identify the evolution of the male-male relationships, it is necessary first to define the Victorian roles of men, what it meant to be masculine, and how these men traditionally interacted with one another. During the late nineteenth century, the idea of masculinity became intrinsically tied to clubs, sport, and public schools. “The 1870s saw a significant modification to the traditional ethos of the public school, associated with a more explicitly imperial rationale. More emphasis was now placed on stoical endurance, group loyalty and team sports.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed before the boys of England were forced into the trenches of the Western Front, there was a sense of brotherhood that was forged between them, and house and school loyalty that would follow them to France and Belgium. At the same time that the school system was moulding boys into finely-educated young men, sports were used in a similar way.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Headlam Wells. *Shakespeare on Masculinity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 45.

<sup>2</sup> Wells. 46.

<sup>3</sup> John Tosh. *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. London: Yale University Press, 1999,177.

“Sports were promoted not only for their training in physical fitness, but for their character-building qualities of courage, self-control, stoical endurance, and the subordination of the ego to the team.”<sup>4</sup> Young men were therefore expected to maintain a “stiff upper lip” in the face of physical and emotional stress, while keeping the ultimate goals of the team in mind.<sup>5</sup> It is this priority of the group’s well-being over the needs of the individual that helped to lay the foundation for the bonds of friendship created between soldiers beginning in 1914. “The rhetoric surrounding masculinity—in relation to athleticism, house and school loyalty, patriotic and imperial sentiment—inevitably relied upon intense group identification, and the matrix of attitudes about manliness and loyalty to impersonal institutions found its logical culmination in the theatre of war.”<sup>6</sup>

One cannot say, however, that these standards of friendship created in the nineteenth century continued untainted by the horrific events of the First World War. The schoolboy mentality of friendly competition, based on honour and loyalty, shifted into a method of survival, an interdependence amongst soldiers in a time when they were most vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> By grouping men from different classes, regions, and religious backgrounds into the trenches and by forcing them to fight and die together, a unique, unparalleled intimacy manifested between the men who were theretofore strangers.<sup>8</sup> This intimacy transversed all emotional aspects and encompasses the physical closeness that connected the men; it was the constant contact that subconsciously bound them together. In the face of death, tactility was one way to reinforce the feeling of being alive: “such intimacy must also be understood to exist as a triumph over death; it must be seen as a

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<sup>4</sup> Tosh. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Tosh. 188.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Cole, “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War”, *English Literary History*, 68 (2001), 475-476.

<sup>7</sup> Cole. 469.

<sup>8</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett. *The Great War*. Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2007, 294

celebration of life, of young men huddled against long winter nights, rotting corpses, and falling shells. Physical contact was a transmission of the wonderful assurance of being alive.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, camaraderie was strengthened through a bodily connection formed from living in the trenches, a lifestyle that was new to soldiers and entirely foreign to them in contrast to civilian life on the home front. Wilfred Owen’s poem “Smile, Smile, Smile” demonstrates the mundane action of reading the mail in a way that shows an almost innate physical connection between two soldiers:

Head to limp head, the sunk-eyed wounded scanned  
Yesterday’s Mail; the casualties (typed small)  
And (large) Vast Booty from our Latest Haul.<sup>10</sup>

The two wounded comrades were leaning on one another for support while reading. Whether it be a conscious decision or not, the men relied on each other for something as unremarkable as reading.

Despite the closeness the soldiers felt to one another, “friendship” became a superfluous name for the interdependent relationships forged in the trenches as combat intensified. Sarah Cole suggests that friendship, as it was in the Victorian era, requires a stability that was inhibited by the very nature of modern warfare; the constant insecurity and impermanence of life made it impossible for friendship to endure.<sup>11</sup> We then come to a junction at which it becomes necessary to differentiate between friendship and comradeship; since the institution of “friendship” had been rendered unrealistic in a setting as volatile as the Western Front, the idea of the individual

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<sup>9</sup> Santanu Das, “‘Kiss Me, Hardy’: Intimacy, Gender, and Gesture in World War I Trench Literature,” *Modernism/Modernity*, 9 (2002), 51.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Silkin, ed. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*. London: Penguin Books, 1996, 209.

<sup>11</sup> Cole. 475.

also became implausible.<sup>12</sup> In Herbert Read's poem "Meditation of the Waking English Officer", one is able to see the strong bond of comrades, even between those of different class and social rank, and how such a bond would not have been possible on the home front in England:

Shall I regret my pact ? Envy that friend  
who risked ignominy, insult, gaol  
rather than stain his hands with human blood ?  
And left his fellow men. Such lonely pride  
was never mine. I answered no call  
there was no call to answer. I felt no hate  
only the anguish of an unknown fate  
a shot, a cry: then armies on the move  
the sudden lull in daily life  
all eyes wide with wonder, past surprise:  
our felt dependence on a ruling few:  
the world madness: the wild plunge:  
the avalanche and I myself a twig  
torn from its mother soil and to the chaos rendered.<sup>13</sup>

This is similar to the Victorian concept of prioritizing the goals of the "whole" over those of the individual. However, in the trenches, the value of human life had diminished and the soldiers comprising the military unit took on a new, morbid role: "the distinction between friendship and comradeship thus signals the difference between a world organized around the individual and one in which human beings, rendered passive and indistinguishable, become fodder for a voracious war machine."<sup>14</sup> This sentiment can be seen in Alec Waugh's anti-war, Romantic poem "Cannon Fodder":

From Albert to Bapaume  
Lonely and bare and desolate,

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<sup>12</sup> Cole. 475.

<sup>13</sup> Silkin. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Cole. 475.

Stretches of muddy filtered green,  
A silence half articulate  
Of all that those dumb eyes have seen.

A battered trench, a tree with boughs  
Smuttled and black with smoke and fire,  
A solitary ruined house,  
A crumpled mass of rusty wire.

And scarlet by each ragged fen  
Long scattered ranks of poppies lay,  
As though the blood of dead men  
Had not been wholly washed away.<sup>15</sup>

From this poem, the haunting aftermath of the landscape speaks volumes about the setting in which the British soldiers were massacred and forced to bond. It was this devaluing of human life, the fact that the soldiers viewed themselves as lambs for slaughter, that severed the Great War notion of “friendship” from that of the nineteenth century. Soldiers fighting on the front line entered a No Man’s Land of their own, separated from the conservative, social constraints of British society and cast into an environment of unpredictable violence and the unprecedented trivialization of human life.<sup>16</sup> It was this abeyance of social norms, the separation from “normal” English society, that allowed for the subsequent types of male-male relationships to manifest.

One such relationship derived from the camaraderie is displayed in a letter written by Lance-Corporal D. H. Fenton to his mother, Mrs. Noone: “I held him in my arms to the end, and when his soul had departed I kissed him twice where I knew you would have kissed him—on the brow—and once for myself.”<sup>17</sup> A new intimacy was thus created between soldiers, one that was certainly absent in the homosocial milieu of the Great War: maternity. Since a strong

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<sup>15</sup> Nils Claussøn, “‘Perpetuating the Language’: Romantic Tradition, the Genre Function, and the Origins of the Trench Lyric,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30, (2006), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Das. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Das. 57.

interdependence between soldiers had already been established, it is important to remark how that relationship was exhibited between the men. In the letter quoted above, one notices the transference of a mother's love to the dying soldier at the moment of death. This pseudo-love is a means of showing tenderness and compassion through a type of role-playing in which the definition of masculinity must be called into question.<sup>18</sup> As a soldier substitutes the maternal role, he aids in comforting a dying comrade in his most vulnerable state; on the brink of death, a mother's kiss, which shows love and affection, is the ultimate comfort.<sup>19</sup> The male-male relationship, in this sense, becomes one in which gender is a nonissue and masculinity is suspended and almost ignored. Another instance in which we see the dying kiss as representative of a nurturing mother figure is in Arthur Newberry Choice's *Lips at the Brim: A Novel*:

“Five minutes, ten minutes, the officer held him there, staring hard at the half-closed eyes, without thinking, without moving. He lowered Raymond to the ground. He felt round his own neck underneath his shirt for the little silver crucifix which Joyce had sent, and finding it, he hung it round Ray'd neck. Afterwards he drew a deep sobbing breath and bent lower and lower, pressing his fevered mouth against the damp hair, the cold, hard forehead, and the pitiful blood-flecked lips.”<sup>20</sup>

It is important to note here that the kiss between the soldiers is neither homoerotic nor romantic, but rather the sole objective of the “dying kiss” is to soothe both the dead or dying soldier and the man tending to him. Such as the case with the camaraderie found in the trenches, the display of “maternal affection” is a tool of dependence between the soldiers, allowing them to relieve the

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<sup>18</sup> Das. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Das. 57.

<sup>20</sup> Das. 58.

effects of the modern war. No longer are these comrades-at-arms held to standards of masculinity; in this homosocial environment devoid of women, as a result of mass conscription, it was necessary for Tommy Atkins to play the role of “mother,” but also came as “temptress,” “lover,” and “object of desire.”<sup>21</sup>

When determining the overall emotional tone of the First World War, “anxiety” and “paranoia” are key words that must be heeded. Europe had been plunged into a widespread panic that impacted every aspect of life, civilian and military. With every crisis, however, there are coping mechanisms used to mitigate the tensions; the “boys in khaki,” for instance, diminished the gravity of war by becoming soldiers in drag.<sup>22</sup> Shows displaying transvestism were frequently put on stages at the front lines and were, in fact, officially authorized by the British military; many Divisions had their own theatre troupe.<sup>23</sup> David Boxwell argues that “the open predilection for, and appreciation of, cross-dressing by the British during World War I was not, therefore, just a subversive or ‘secret’ form of transgressive ‘release.’ Rather it was also a seemingly mandated form of ludic experimentation that was structured by the crisis of the homo/hetero binary within homosocial formations.”<sup>24</sup> Once again, due the unprecedented mass conscription, Britain’s boys found a way to relieve the anxiety caused by the the war away from home and the new, all-male environment in which they found themselves: “The cross-dressed entertainments permitted the creation of a quasi-utopian space where the traumatic undercurrents of this social drama could receive at least partial salutary psychic and cultural propitiation.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cole. 475.

<sup>22</sup> David A. Boxwell, “The Follies of War: Cross-Dressing and Popular Theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-18, *Modernism/modernity*, 9 (2002) 4.

<sup>23</sup> Boxwell. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Boxwell. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Boxwell. 5.

Indeed, performances in drag were not new to British society. Shakespearean theatre was exclusively male-performed and more recently in the late nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a display of transvestism.<sup>26</sup> Drag performances in the British trenches, however, served a rather different purpose. Similarly to how soldiers used physical contact to ensure that they were alive, constantly surrounded by death, drag permitted the men to reinforce the fact that they were men. For example, Boxwell suggests that cross-dressing and drag performances were a defence against "the war's potential unmaning of the male body."<sup>27</sup> Implied here is the idea that, as a result of the completely male-dominated environment of the trenches, not only did the men become desensitized to death, but they also became numbed to the male sex. By creating a fantasy situation in which a male soldier dressed as a woman, the spectators became aware of their own gender and, in turn, were self-assured of their masculinity.<sup>28</sup> However, one would be remiss to ignore the homoerotic undertones of dressing in drag in a homosocial environment, "cross-dressing did not necessarily guarantee itself as a signifying practice of homosexuality; but certainly, by the time of the Great War, it could not be divorced from connotations of sexual perversity and aberrant desires."<sup>29</sup> A refrain from a song performed frequently in drag on the front line entitled "I'll Make a Man of You" may lend itself greatly to the connection with homosexual desires:

On Sunday I walk out with a soldier.  
On Monday I'm taken by a tar,  
On Tuesday I'm out with a baby Boy Scout,  
On Wednesday a Hussar,

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Aldrich, ed. *Gay Life and Culture: A History*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2006, 172.

<sup>27</sup> Boxwell. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Boxwell. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Boxwell. 10.

On Thursday I gang oot wi' a Scottie,  
On Friday the Captain of the Crew.  
But on Saturday I'm willing, if you'll only take a shilling,  
To make a man of any one of you.<sup>30</sup>

Naturally, expressing this level of effeminacy on the front implied an inherent homosexual aspect of life in the trenches; masculinity continued to be the standard by which men were judged.

Homosexual relations between soldiers is an ancient tradition in and of itself that must not be disregarded. Although it was not explicitly elucidated, the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad* is suggested to have been one of a more amorous disposition.<sup>31</sup> If such same-sex practices existed in antiquity, it can be assumed that these customs between soldiers were continued, to some extent, into the twentieth century. To better understand the cultural incongruity of homosexual relations between men in the trenches, one must analyze the social situation in England in 1914. The Labouchere Amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 stated that "any act of gross indecency with another male person" would result in a prison sentence "not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour."<sup>32 33</sup> One impacting of these sentences was that of Mr. Oscar Wilde who, having been tried for "gross indecency" in 1895, was forced to serve the maximum two years in prison with hard labour.<sup>34</sup> In this era, homosexual desire and relations were described as the "love that dare not speak its name."<sup>35</sup> The public's opinion of Oscar Wilde as shown in the London *Daily Telegraph* represents the rejection of homosexuals in England: "It will be a public benefit, compensating for

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<sup>30</sup> Boxwell. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Aldrich. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Aldrich. 186.

<sup>33</sup> Boxwell. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Byrne Fone, *Homophobia: A History*. New York: Picador, 2000, 307

<sup>35</sup> Shelley I. Salamensky, "Re-Presenting Oscar Wilde: Wilde's Trials, Gross Indecency, and Documentary Spectacle", *Theatre Journal*, 54 (2002), 580.

a great deal that has been painful in the reports of this trial, if the exposure of a chief representative of the immoral school leads to a clearer perception of its tendency and heartier contempt for its methods. There is nothing difficult to understand in the principles of such people or in the results to which they lead...”<sup>36</sup> The view general view of homosexuality in late-nineteenth century England was clearly a hostile one.

At this juncture one must ask how homosexuality was able to prevail in the trenches, in a very public space, and in an environment seemingly influenced by the strict heterosexual norms of masculinity of Victorian England. If the public viewed “effeminate dandies” as wicked and corruptive, how could homosexual practices exist on the front during the Great War? Once again, it is necessary to recognize that the modern warfare and situation of 1914-1918 allowed for the redefining of gender roles and, ultimately, the reconceptualization of masculinity.<sup>37</sup> To answer this question, it is imperative to realize that homosexuality is not a rejection of masculinity. It is, like the nurturing and comradely aspect of the male-male relationships, a celebration of the beauty of life.<sup>38</sup> The homoeroticism must not be compared to the heteronormative romance in English society, but must be analyzed in its unique, modern situation of wartime.<sup>39</sup> For example, the desire for the male body is a result of the desire for an escape of the mutilation, ugliness, and death faced daily on the front.<sup>40</sup>

Although the historical evidence for homosexual love and desire is scarce, one is able to look at the literary oeuvres of the soldier-poets from the Great War for such testimony. One such

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<sup>36</sup> Fone. 308

<sup>37</sup> Susan R. Grayzel. *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Das. 62.

<sup>39</sup> Das. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Cole. 483.

poet, Wilfred Owen, demonstrated in his works the homoerotic undertones of the war. He is a perfect example because his poetry strays away from the poetic traditions of the Romantics and the Victorians, visibly highlighting the separation of the Great War era from the Victorian era.<sup>41</sup> In his poem, “Apologia Pro Poemate Meo,” Owen displays homoerotic attraction albeit not romantic:

I have made fellowships – (18)  
Untold of happy lovers in old song.  
For love is not the binding of fair lips  
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips, – (22)  
But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes are  
strong;  
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;  
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty (27)  
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;  
Heard music in the silentness of duty;  
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.<sup>42</sup>

Firstly, Owen alludes to a bond that was unknown by lovers of times past, an incomparable love that is not the result of kissing, but is caused by the closeness of life in the trenches. By stating that “love is not the binding of fair lips” (l. 20), it is possible that Owen is alluding to the illegality of male-male intimacy as enforced by the Labouchere Amendment. Although there is nothing explicitly homosexual about this, the implicit homoeroticism is found in the comparison to kissing of the past. In the following stanza, the theme of nurturing and the mother figure is reintroduced when the poet says, “Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips” (l. 25). By

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<sup>41</sup> Clausson. 113.

<sup>42</sup> Silkin. 197.

juxtaposing the sentiment of motherhood with the grotesque realism of trench warfare, Owen reinforces the dreamlike state in which the soldiers found themselves, a state in which anything can happen.

When Owen says that he had seen the beauty in hoarse others, heard music in the silence, and found peace in the midst of fighting, the reader is able to assume that these contradictions are a result of the uniqueness of the situation in the trenches; finding beauty in the ugliest of places, finding beauty in the men whose lives depended on one another and finding solace in knowing that one was still alive. The homosexual love between soldiers was defined, once again, as an expression of being alive in contrast with the mutilation and death faced daily. It is for this reason that homoerotic behaviour was ostensibly able to exist on the Front of the Great War while it was undoubtedly condemned on the British home front.<sup>43</sup>

Santanu Das argues that “it is important to remember that experiences shared in the trenches for three years had almost no parallel in previous wars, and that any discussion of gender and sexuality must accord with this unique situation.”<sup>44</sup> The Great War can be seen as an allegorical No Man’s Land, marking a period of uncertainty and ambiguity between nineteenth century social standards and modernist society. Men who dug their own trenches and graves, indeed saw death claim those with whom they forged the strongest bonds, were expected to return to England to the families they had created or had yet to create.<sup>45</sup> Post-war society would not accept the newfound wartime relationships as romantic or nurturing and it would disregard the portrayal of the female gender through cross-dressing. Das suggests that the British public, following 1918 would translate these relationships solely “into a sentimental rhetoric of sacrifice

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<sup>43</sup> Das. 66.

<sup>44</sup> Das. 54.

<sup>45</sup> Beckett. 299

and comradeship.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the redefinition of masculinity and male-male relationships during the war, Tommy Atkins, brother, “mother,” and lover would be widely considered a loyal soldier fighting for king and country. The bonds formed between soldiers on the Western front would remain, like the echos of Lee-Enfields and haunting songs, concealed in the trenches remaining a mystery perhaps never to be solved.

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<sup>46</sup> Das. 60.

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