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**Humour and Representation in British
Literature of the First World War
(1914–18)**

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Abstract

Great War literature, most famously the conflict's poetry, is known for its gravity, for emotive evocations of suffering, yet an abundance of humorous writing about experiences of the war was published in the 1914–18 period. This thesis addresses the question of what humour adds to the depiction of the war. Previous studies have often either overlooked humorous First World War literature or discussed it for its role as a coping mechanism, emphasising its psychological importance and ways in which it boosted morale. Such approaches diverge from the treatment that the most celebrated, solemn texts of the war have received, these having been the subject of extensive formal and historical analysis. I bring together a range of humorous Great War texts by a mixture of celebrated and lesser-known authors, showing the pervasiveness of humour across a variety of genres – poetry, trench newspapers, short stories, and theatre – and drawing on a range of theories of humour, from Kantian incongruity to Freudian relief, to elucidate how these texts invite amusement and the effects this has. Such theorisation and close attention to humorous Great War texts and the contexts in which they arose reveals, first, that humour frequently creates nuanced and moving pictures of war experience, capturing diverse aspects of wartime life, from disruptions to the domestic sphere to fighting on the front line. Second, I demonstrate the robustness of humour: the war was portrayed using types of humorous writing that had been popular before 1914. More than this, in fact, at times well-established styles of humour seem to be particularly apt for evoking certain elements of war experience. This thesis thus presents a substantial intervention into understandings of the literary representation of the First World War, highlighting humour as a central part of how writers across multiple genres created complex, varied impressions of the conflict.

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Introduction

Humour abounds in British First World War literature. Humorous writing was the chosen medium of a great variety of authors, from anonymous, amateur contributors to magazines, to now little-read writers such as Gertrude Jennings and F. Tennyson Jesse, and to better-known or still famous figures, including George Bernard Shaw, A. A. Milne, J. M. Barrie, Wyndham Lewis, and Saki (H. H. Munro). Humour surfaces in a range of genres and publishing contexts, and in texts aimed at a variety of audiences. The comic periodicals that had enjoyed immense popularity since the mid-nineteenth century – most famously *Punch; or, The London Charivari* – printed humorous stories, articles, and cartoons about the conflict, catering to the entertainment needs of their large audiences. Staples of the press such as the *Strand Magazine* and *Blackwood's Magazine* similarly issued humorous short fiction about the war, with commentators in a range of periodicals in addition exploring humour's relationship to national identity and the significance of humour in times of conflict. Longer prose could also involve amusement, with some novels published during the 1914–18 period containing humour. Trench newspapers, written by and primarily for serving military personnel are almost exclusively comic, offering amusing stories, parodies, verse, rumour columns, drawings and cartoons, as well as an abundance of in-jokes and personal teasing. Large amounts of poetry addressing the war involves whimsy, comic absurdity, and sardonicism; humorous moments even appear in otherwise solemn poetic texts. Theatrical performances show an equal preoccupation with humour. Music hall was popular, while farces, revue sketches, comedies and musical comedies were counted amongst the most successful dramatic genres of the war years. Humour could also be found on the stage of theatres with a reputation for literarily and socially radical plays, such as the Court Theatre in London. By 1914 both theatres and music halls were rivalled as providers of popular entertainment by the growing cinema industry, and here too humour drew in audiences.¹

I explore humour for its role in textual representation, demonstrating that it was central to the literary rendering of the war. My thesis establishes that humour, repeatedly, and across all genres, contributes to vivid, nuanced, and enlightening illustrations of war experience, often conveying intriguingly unexpected and subtle outlooks on the conflict. This is a fresh perspective on the function that humour serves in Great War writing since, on the relatively rare occasions when First World War humour has been discussed, it has chiefly been understood as a peripheral, relatively unimportant aspect of the conflict's literary representation, and/or as a coping mechanism, deemed to be important mainly for the ways in which it contributed to resilience and morale during the war years. I determine that in poetry, trench newspapers, professionally produced periodicals, and theatre, humour was used,

¹ *The Better 'Ole* (1918) and Charlie Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) were particularly well received. Emma Hanna, 'British Cinema, Regulation and the War Effort, 1914–1918', in *British Theatre and the Great War, 1914–1919: New Perspectives*, ed. by Andrew Maunder (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 195–214 (pp. 200, 207).

variously, to depict the fighting front as being an absurd, topsy-turvy environment, to present servicemen as playful, to reflect and contend with the depersonalising effects of the military machine, to articulate anxieties surrounding class and gender relations, death, and grief, and to capture camaraderie, disquiet, patriotism, bravery, and optimism.² Humour contributed to the articulation of senses of national identity. It facilitated the portrayal of certain kinds of wartime activity as desirable, such as women volunteering to provide food and shelter for servicemen, and it conveyed the impression that insouciance and light-heartedness were praiseworthy attitudes to the conflict. It added to the evocation of loss, addressing the personal cost of the war. The experiences and impressions that humour helped to represent are thus highly diverse, with humour at times mixing with solemnity in portrayals of the conflict's most distressing aspects. That humorous texts often challenge the 'tragic' image of the conflict, therefore, does not mean that an equally simple, 'comic' picture should replace it. Rather, humour should be recognised as a key aspect of how the war was portrayed in a range of texts, being so pervasive that it emerges in writing that is otherwise serious, as well as in works that are labelled as comic.

My analysis reveals that humorous styles of representation established before 1914 were sufficiently robust to be adapted to the depiction of the conflict: I demonstrate the durability of humorous modes of writing. Longstanding forms and features of humorous literature met what has often been seen as a challenge – portraying an event viewed as extraordinary and even unprecedented – with amusing texts about the war echoing the lively, varied culture of humorous literature that existed before hostilities began. The comic absurdity that featured in wartime poetry, for example, had echoes of pre-1914 nonsense literature, while the humour of trench newspapers reproduced that of established mainstream periodicals, music hall, and cinema. Similarly, the insouciant amusement associated with Great War short stories developed from a style of 'British' humour established before the conflict, as well as from the writing of nineteenth-century special correspondents. The humour in war plays balanced provocativeness and entertainment, a tension that helped to manage the different demands – of playwrights, censors, theatre managers, and audiences – that were present in the British theatre industry since before 1914. There have been prominent challenges to the view that the conflict was such an unsettling event that it revealed the limits of what styles labelled 'traditional' could capture, and my thesis contributes to such revision.

Uncovering humour's role in representing the war involves treating it to the kind of close attention that has in the past mainly been reserved for solemn examples of the conflict's literature, with humorous First World War writing having primarily been approached for its psychological significance, as noted above. I do consider points at which humour encourages good morale, as well as moments where it promotes certain attitudes and behaviour in support of the British war effort. For example, in a number of texts characters and speakers who are represented as having well-developed senses of humour

² I follow, broadly, Kate McLoughlin's definition of the 'military machine' or 'war machine' as the 'military system of rules and regulations'.

Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), p. 182.

are also depicted as resilient and brave, encouraging similar responses from readers. Understanding First World War humour in the context of its psychological value, though, does not take full account of what it adds to the representation of the conflict, the role it has in describing different experiences of the war. The psychological approach often also involves placing humour in the well-worn context of the fighting's 'horrors', making it a corollary of the experiences of suffering for which the conflict is best known, an approach that says more about how the war has been remembered than it elucidates the literary workings of humorous war texts themselves. The tendency to stay away from detailed textual analysis of humorous war writing stands in contrast to critical responses to solemn texts about the war, which have been explored extensively at a formal level, scrutinised and celebrated for the techniques they employ in creating depictions of conflict experience. Paying close formal attention to humorous Great War texts is thus a significant move in itself, and it is this kind of exploration that underpins the new perspective on humour in First World War writing described above: that humour was of central importance to the literary depiction of the conflict. Uncomfortably, given that the 1914–18 hostilities are primarily remembered for the death and suffering they caused, reading humorous First World War literature for how it portrays the conflict means acknowledging both that it invites amusement, and that it is also, often, a fitting and evocative means of rendering experiences of the war.

0.1 The Definitions and Varieties of Great War Humour.

The question of defining and identifying humour, whether in First World War literature or elsewhere, is complex and vexed, this contestation speaking not only to the subjectivity of senses of humour but also to the range of what may be considered humorous.³ I embrace the multifaceted nature of humour by adopting a wide, inclusive approach to selecting texts, creating a corpus of poems, short stories, articles, sketches, and plays that reflect the diversity of works that can come under the category of 'humorous First World War literature'. I consider a text to be humorous if it invites mirth (amusement).⁴ One relatively uncomplicated means of identifying such invitations is with reference to the ways in which texts are labelled: if a work is described as comic or belongs to a genre associated with comedy, then it can be categorised as humorous – as encouraging mirth. Dramas branded as comedies or farces, for example, as well as texts from trench newspapers (publications known for their heavy reliance on

³ Defining humour often attracts anxiety and controversy. Laurent Berlant and Sianne Ngai observe that 'subjective feelings are as defining and central to horror and melodrama as the feeling of the funny is to comedy', but that 'debates about whether tragedies are tragedies or westerns westerns don't usually produce the same affective intensity, fierceness, or sense of urgency to determine correct identification of their borders'. This may be because humour 'suffuses so many genres that are not comedy it is hard to draw lines', and because 'there is something internal to comedy—maybe its capacity to hold together' a 'variety of manifestly clashing or ambiguous affects' that gives it 'uniquely ambiguous' boundaries. Mirth may provoke more intense debate in comparison, for example, to empathy because 'empathy's objects are the effects of training whereas comedic pleasure involves surprise and spontaneity and therefore we take its contestation [...] as an interference with a core freedom'. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, 'Comedy Has Issues', *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2017), 233–49 (pp. 242, 239).

⁴ The pleasurable sensation often experienced in response to humour is generally referred to as 'mirth' or 'comic amusement'. I also use 'amusement' synonymously with these terms. Noël Carroll, 'Comic Amusement, Emotion, and Cognition', in *On Emotions: Philosophical Essays*, ed. by John Deigh (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 76–98 (p. 76).

humour), and periodicals such as *Punch* can reasonably be included in a study of Great War humour. Secondly, though, humour – invitations to amusement – can also occur in texts that do not belong to types of writing usually thought of as comic. Here a distinction between humour and comedy is useful: comedy is treated in this thesis as a generic marker – for example to refer to texts that have the kind of eucatastrophe, or happy ending, associated with comic structure – whereas humour can be more local, appearing in texts that might be solemn overall, but which have specific sections or features that encourage mirth. In such cases, where it is not possible to classify a text as humorous using generic labels, I employ close reading combined with theorisation of why we experience amusement, drawing on a range of philosophies of humour. This thesis includes texts that contain techniques, types of characterisation, descriptions of setting, and/or tones that invite amusement. Often, these works involve moments of ambiguity, where texts are not obviously or undisputedly humorous, moments which can be especially revealing because they highlight the boundaries of humour, and the points at which humour, seriousness, and solemnity intertwine.⁵ These kinds of uncertainties are incorporated as part of my project of exploring the varied nature of humour in war texts, and the range of moods that humour can have.

Making assessments using close literary analysis is thus central to my approach: just as it is possible to detect and explore different qualities and effects in solemn texts via detailed examination of such things as technique, theme, vocabulary, characterisation, and tone, so it is viable to identify and explore different types of humorous inflection and their potential impact in the same way. Sianne Ngai's perspective on the nature of literary tone, which takes account of its slipperiness, of the ambiguities involved in determining what she calls the 'state of affairs' in a text, offers a useful insight into the approach I adopt. Ngai defines tone as an 'affective-aesthetic idea', which is 'reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story'.⁶ Accordingly, I evaluate humour by scrutinising both the responses to the conflict depicted within texts, and the kinds of reaction that texts invite – asking what attitude or feeling they encourage in readers in relation to the war.⁷ For example, some of the writing analysed in this thesis represents servicemen as playful and even clownish, appealing to readers to emulate and enjoy these characteristics. My analysis is thus focused within the literary works themselves: it is dedicated to investigating how they present the war, including what and how they 'solicit' from their audiences, rather than centring on the actual emotional responses to which they give rise, or on the question of whether they produce amusement, either now or for their original audiences.

⁵ Because some humorous war texts address serious issues, I distinguish between 'solemnity' and 'seriousness'. I use 'solemnity' in relation to mood, to refer to texts that are 'gloomy', 'grim', and/or 'sombre', whilst I use 'seriousness' more in relation to topics, to refer to that which is important and significant. This is a useful simplification, but Chapter Four especially explores more complex relationships between seriousness and solemnity.

⁶ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), p. 41.

⁷ This means that references to texts and techniques being 'humorous' and/or 'disquieting', for example, denote 'texts that invite humour' and 'texts that invite disquiet'.

Even so, where feasible and relevant it is enlightening to consider how my chosen texts were received during the war, for example when assessing the relative progressiveness or conservatism of certain portrayals, and this includes considering a range of responses that humour may provoke alongside, or instead of, mirth. Although the texts selected all, to different degrees, invite amusement, humour can give rise to different feelings as well, either by invitation or otherwise. As becomes clear in the final chapter especially, humour at points prompts, for example, offence or shock – sometimes intentionally on the part of the writer – and such reactions can be at least as revealing about the role of humour in a text as any amusement created. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant and Ngai allude, it is not necessarily the case that even failed attempts to provoke amusement should be discounted from the category of humour: judgments that certain invitations to mirth are ‘bad or unfunny, reactionary or conservative’ should be recognised as being ‘preferences’ rather than inarguable verdicts on what is and is not humorous.⁸ With this in mind, I have included texts that are difficult to see as amusing, either because they are particularly context-specific, because they involve in-jokes, or because they contain mockery based on gender, sexuality, and xenophobia.

Because of this expansive approach to humour, there is the freedom in this thesis to examine a range of texts. The majority of the works I consider are light and sometimes ephemeral, many are anonymous, and many may not have the kind of aesthetic quality associated with those examples of Great War literature that are now most famous, notably the poems of the trench lyricists. In drawing attention to the kind of writing that was widespread at the time of the conflict, my research corresponds with approaches to First World War literature that emphasise its variety, approaches that are all-embracing and cover material that was popular during the war years but which has not become canonical. However, I also compare slight, light writing with solemn texts that are well known, and/or that are by celebrated authors. This involves reading some predominantly grave Great War writing in the context of comic portrayals of the conflict, of theories of humour, and of traditions of humorous literature, revealing the presence of humour in unexpected places. Again, close reading is important here. Some of the slighter, simpler texts I explore may not at first seem to warrant the kind of scrutiny to which I subject them, but this attention does bring out some intriguing and surprising points of contact between apparently dissimilar works. For instance, Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (1916) conveys a sense of dehumanisation and a complex, partially whimsical reaction to this, and other, less famous and more comical poems featuring anthropomorphised rats similarly portray soldiers as experiencing abasement.

My choice to include this range of texts is made in the awareness that the selection of material is an especially significant act of criticism when engaging in a field in which there are so many debates over what its object of study is or should be. ‘First World War writing’ most loosely encompasses not only literature written during the war, but also literature that was written and/or published after the end of hostilities, but which is about the conflict or influenced by it. This broad definition would cover texts

⁸ Berlant and Ngai, p. 241.

that depict the fighting itself, that centre on non-combatant and civilian life during the conflict, that have the war as a setting, that address the conflict obliquely, and that register the after-effects of the fighting. Concentrating on humour narrows the field, but not sufficiently for the space available in a thesis. Selecting only British texts is therefore partly a pragmatic decision based on the confines of space, but the British context is also interesting and important because of the especial strength of and controversy surrounding the British war myth – ‘myth’ here meaning the “‘history you can remember” [...] a belief about the past [...] common to a social group’.⁹ The notion of Britishness is interrogated later in the thesis, but for practicality I have defined ‘British writers’ to mean authors who were citizens of what was then the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. At times, I have also included writers who were not born in the U.K. but whose works are usefully understood within a British context, for example those who lived and published in the U.K., and/or who served in the British forces. I focus on texts from the 1914–18 period that in some way represent and comment on war experience specifically. This allows for recuperation of a corpus of lesser-read texts from the time of the conflict itself, a corpus that indicates the importance of humour to contemporary representations of the war, as well as room for discussing writing about a range of experiences, including those of servicemen, non-combatants, women, and civilians. As the chapters progress the focus of the thesis moves spatially from the front line towards the home front, which progression gives rise to an associated broadening of experiences and subjects, both in terms of whose lives are portrayed and with regard to the war’s social and political implications (for example, considerations of nationhood, gender, and class).

As well as using printed material in physical libraries and archives during my research, including the research collection in the Newcastle Robinson Library, the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, and the Tyne and Wear Archives, I have accessed sources that have been digitised and placed online. The database ‘Trench Journals and Unit Magazines of the First World War’ was particularly useful, since it brings together an extensive range of trench newspapers. So too was the Punch Historical Archive, which includes valuable information about the periodical’s history and authorship that eased the task of tracing continuities between wartime and pre-war humour.¹⁰ My use of digital resources likely means that some revealing aspects of physical texts’ materiality is lost. For example, the Trench Newspapers database encompasses periodicals that have been professionally bound and presented in souvenir volumes, as well as rough, handwritten magazines, and most states of production in between. On screen, however, these appear far more uniform, giving little sense of how the texts varied and how they might have been read; some could be more like personal notebooks than fully formed newspapers. Indeed, a physical edition of the *Growler* magazine located in Newcastle

⁹ Dan Todman, *The Great War, Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. xiii.

¹⁰ Julian Walker has noted that other magazines also enjoyed great popularity during the war, these having been overshadowed by *Punch* in scholarly work. (Julian Walker, ‘Populist Satirical Magazines During the First World War’, conference paper, Humour and the First World War, The Open University, London, 20 June 2018). Even so, *Punch* had some of its highest sales during the war, and still provides a good reference point for assessing popular humorous writing (‘About’, *Punch Magazine Cartoon Archive*, 2017 <<http://www.punch.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 14 March 2017]).

Central Library proved to be much smaller than the journal appeared in digitised form: it was slighter and more like ephemera than its online counterpart, speaking, perhaps, to the value of making the magazines portable and/or to paper shortages. The material information sacrificed by using digital records, however, is balanced by the variety and abundance of texts that such resources provide.

With the selection of material in mind, it is worth drawing attention to aspects of war experience that were not frequently – or, potentially, ever – treated humorously during the 1914–18 period. Humour was regularly used to represent a range of potentially challenging topics, and this included especially sensitive areas such as grief and death. These latter subjects are not, though, as common in humorous literature as are less emotionally testing ones, and treating death and destruction humorously tends to be a privilege of authors who are also servicemen. I explore some of the implications of these gaps in Chapter Three, but one especially noticeable absence from humorous Great War literature to note here is psychological trauma, which tends not to appear in humorous texts either by servicemen or non-combatants. The closest examples of humorous approaches to this experience I have encountered are in John Galsworthy's play *The Foundations* (1917), discussed in Chapter Four, in which an ex-servicemen relives a traumatic war memory prompted by the mention of larks singing, and in Sapper's (H. C. McNeile's) story 'Bendigo Jones – His Tree' (1917), in which a futurist artist sculpts something that looks so unlike a tree when asked to create camouflage that he is assumed to be shell-shocked.¹¹ More common are associations between psychological trauma and hysterical or uncontrolled laughter, a kind of laughter that is separable from humour.¹² The war's harmful effects on mental health are thus not only, usually, missing from humorous Great War writing, but are even depicted as corrupting humour, with what is normally an expression of amusement becoming a disturbing manifestation of the conflict's psychological impact. The lack of humorous representations of psychological trauma, and the lesser-frequency of humorous depictions of death and destruction, suggest that there were some aspects of war experience to which humorous representation was – or was deemed to be – inappropriate, aspects that escaped or were unsuitable for capture by techniques of humorous writing. Nevertheless, I move away from the ingrained notion that it was naïve or deceitful for writers to portray the war in ways that did not focus on suffering, pain, and anger, and that such depictions are entirely removed from what the war was 'really like'. Humorous accounts of the conflict do not always include the worst experiences brought about by the war, but this makes them surprising, different perspectives and not, necessarily, imbued with disingenuousness or insensibility.

The absence of certain topics points towards the influence of censorship and self-censorship during the war period, as well as pressures to represent the conflict in ways that were patriotic, that

¹¹ John Galsworthy, *The Foundations* (1917) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920); Sapper (H. C. McNeile), 'Bendigo Jones – His Tree', in *No Man's Land* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917), pp. 197–216.

¹² See, for example: Wilfred Owen, 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo' (1917), in *Poems by Wilfred Owen*, ed. by Siegfried Sassoon (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921), pp. 4–5; Wilfrid W. Gibson, 'Mud', in *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Vivien Noakes (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), p. 313; Anna Gordon Keown, 'Reported Missing', in *War Verse* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1919), p. 245.

aligned with official narratives, and that encouraged opinions and behaviour useful to the British war effort. Censorship was at work in various different forms. These included, for example, the Press Bureau, which controlled what was printed in newspapers, and the more wide-ranging Defence of the Realm Act (DORA).¹³ The act was aimed to prevent ‘false reports or reports likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty or to interfere with the success of His Majesty’s forces’.¹⁴ The letters and publications of those in military service were in addition censored by officers, and the system of theatre censorship begun long before the outbreak of war remained in place.¹⁵ Several of the authors I consider were, furthermore, affiliated with the War Propaganda Bureau established at Wellington House in 1914 (which would be reorganised several times during the war, becoming part of the Department of Information in 1917).¹⁶ The Bureau engaged writers to produce literature in service of the war effort, using private publishing companies to disguise governmental direction.¹⁷ The extent to which such affiliations influenced the representations of war experience that I analyse is unclear, even in the cases of authors who have attracted relatively extensive critical and biographical attention, such as Galsworthy and Barrie, both of whom were associated with the Bureau.¹⁸ Similarly difficult to quantify are the effects of self-censorship and considerations of taste, with authors likely choosing not to write or publish texts that may not have been deemed acceptable, either by official censorship or by audiences, on grounds of decorum and appropriateness. To address the relationship between humour, censorship, and propaganda, I elucidate the ideological shape humour has in individual texts, paying attention to the ways in which it encourages certain outlooks on the conflict. This analysis involves highlighting examples of how humour proliferates, and is subject to, ideological pressures, such as views about the ‘correct’ behaviour for men and women during the war, as well as exclusive, conservative ideas of national identity. In these instances, cultural mobilisation is at play, a phenomenon involving the ‘imaginative’ engagement ‘of the different belligerent nations in their war efforts [...], through collective representations and the belief and value systems giving rise to these’.¹⁹ As already noted, part of my project is to draw attention to the variety that exists in humorous Great War writing, and this means including both conservative and more liberal reactions. I also present several case studies into the workings of official censorship in Chapter Four, which is on theatre, an opportunity to consider in detail the ways in which humour could conform

¹³ Deian Hopkin, ‘Domestic Censorship in the First World War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5 (1970), 151–69 (pp. 53–56).

¹⁴ Defence of the Realm Act, *National Archives*, 1914

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/transcripts/first_world_war/defence_ofthe-realm.htm> [accessed 17 November 2016].

¹⁵ The 1737 Licensing Act gave the Lord Chamberlain wide-ranging powers of censorship and licensing. These were confirmed in an 1843 act. John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain’s Blue Pencil* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), pp. 29–30.

¹⁶ Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1999), pp. 9, 42–43.

¹⁷ Taylor, p. 36.

¹⁸ Taylor, p. 36.

¹⁹ John Horne, qtd. in Matthew C. Hendley, ‘Cultural Mobilization and British Responses to Cultural Transfer in Total War: The Shakespeare Tercentenary of 1916’, *First World War Studies*, 3 (2012), 25–49 (p. 26).

to and challenge the limits of acceptability. Theatre is a helpful setting for this discussion because there exists an archive created precisely in the context of judging scripts' contentiousness: the Lord Chamberlain's collection at the British Library, which consists of plays submitted for licensing and censors' responses to them.

To explain how my texts invite amusement, I refer to classic, universalising psychological and philosophical theories of humour, which centre on explaining why we experience the pleasurable sensation of mirth, and/or on why we laugh. By convention these theories are grouped into three ways of understanding humour, referred to as: relief, incongruity, and superiority, with some researchers also connecting theories of play with humour.²⁰ The classic theories vary in their objects of study. For example, the most well-known superiority theory – that of Thomas Hobbes – is focused on explaining laughter. Those who link humour and play, meanwhile, are engaged with a broader category: humour may be a form of play, but not all play is humorous. Nevertheless, all of these theories tend to be discussed together, whether they relate to humour specifically, to the expression of the emotion to which humour gives rise, or to the contexts in which it takes place.

According to superiority theories, we feel amused when we recognise that we are better than the object of mirth. This idea is associated with Hobbes' views in particular. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes outlines different human emotions and traits and the contexts in which they arise, including, for example, anger, magnanimity, desire, and dejection. He associates 'laughter' and 'scorn' with what he calls 'sudden glory':

Sudden Glory is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.²¹

As these comments make clear, there is a critical element to Hobbes' view; he sees laughter as most typical of those who recognise only limited abilities in themselves. 'Great minds' are likely to avoid 'scorn[ing]' others, and to measure themselves only against those who have the best qualities. Hobbes' interest is in ridicule or mockery, and this is also true of René Descartes' views in the *Passions of the Soul* (1649), another prominent work in the development of the superiority theory. Descartes writes that:

²⁰ For an especially useful example of the many works that explain them, see John Morreall's *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humour* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

²¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651) (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 38.

Derision or mockery is a species of joy mingled with hatred, which stems from perception of some trivial evil in a person we think deserves it. We feel hatred for the evil, and joy at seeing it in the person who deserves it. And when this occurs unexpectedly, the sudden wonderment causes us to burst out laughing [...] we see that those whose defects are very conspicuous, for instance, the lame, the one-eyed, or the hunchbacked, or those who have received some public slight, are particularly given to derision. For, since they wish to see other people as ill-favoured as themselves, they are delighted by the evils that befall them, and regard them as deserved.²²

As the vocabulary of ‘scorn’ and ‘mockery’ indicates, superiority theories may help to explain the emotions that we feel, for example, in relation to especially biting satire, which can see mirth mixed with dislike.

There have been many critiques of the superiority theory. Francis Hutcheson, for example, is frequently associated with its rebuttal. In his 1725 *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks on the Fable of the Bees*, he notes a distinction between

the words Laughter and Ridicule: this last is but one particular species of the former, when we are laughing at the follies of others; and in this species there may be some pretence to allege that some imagined superiority may occasion it, but then there are innumerable instances of Laughter, where no person is ridiculed; nor does he who laughs compare himself to any thing whatsoever. Thus how often do we laugh at some out-of-the-way description of natural objects, to which we never compare our state at all.²³

Hutcheson points out that ‘if Laughter arose from our imagined superiority’, then the ‘more that any object appeared inferior to us, the greater would be the jest’ and ‘the nearer any one came to an equality with us [...] the less we should be moved with Laughter’.²⁴ In fact, he notes, ‘some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry; whereas their duller actions, in which they are much below us, are no matter of jest at all’.²⁵ Hutcheson expands upon this with an illustration of an instance in which superiority may give rise to sorrow rather than pleasure. ‘If we observe an object in pain while we are at ease’, he suggests, ‘we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing: and yet here is occasion for Hobbes’s sudden joy’. It would ‘be a very merry state in

²² René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul and Other Late Philosophical Writings* (1649), trans. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), p. 268.

²³ Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter, and Remarks Upon the Fable of the Bees* (1725) (Glasgow: R. Urie, for Daniel Baxter, 1750), p. 13.

²⁴ Hutcheson, pp 10–11.

²⁵ Hutcheson, p. 11.

which a fine gentleman [...] in his coach, [...] passes our streets, where he will see so many ragged beggars [...] on every side of him'.²⁶

The incongruity theory of humour is now generally viewed as being more persuasive. Early proponents include Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard. According to incongruity theories, mirth is prompted by the perception of dissonance. Kant in *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*) (1790) writes that:

In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing.* This very transformation, which is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding, is nevertheless indirectly enjoyable [...]. The cause must thus consist in the influence of the representation on the body and its reciprocal effect on the mind.²⁷

Kant gives several examples of humour situations to illustrate his perspective. For instance, he tells the story of an heir who wanted to arrange a lavish funeral for his deceased benefactor, but found this difficult 'because (he says), "the more money I give my mourners to look sad, the merrier they look"'. We 'laugh out loud' in response to this story, Kant says, because 'an expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing'.²⁸ That is, the context and questions established by the start of the tale generates a build-up of anticipation, which is dissipated by what we might today call the punch line of the tale. Going into more detail about why such a process gives rise to laughter, Kant develops an idea of what he calls 'oscillation' in the mind:

The joke must always contain something that can deceive for a moment: hence, when the illusion disappears into nothing, the mind looks back again in order to try it once more, and thus is hurried this way and that by rapidly succeeding increases and decreases of tension and set into oscillation.²⁹

This 'movement of the mind' is reflected in 'an internal bodily movement', 'harmonis[ing]' with 'the organs of the body', producing a 'movement that is conducive to health'.³⁰ Kant explains that, for him, when we encounter a joke 'the understanding, in this presentation in which it does not find what was expected, suddenly relaxes, one feels the effect of this relaxation in the body through the oscillation of

²⁶ Hutcheson, p. 11.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 209.

²⁸ Kant, p. 209.

²⁹ Kant, p. 210.

³⁰ Kant, p. 210.

the organs, which promotes the restoration of their balance and has a beneficial influence on health'.³¹ Indeed, as with theories classed under the 'relief' label, in Kant's discussion laughter is framed in highly physical, bodily terms that he relates to wellbeing:

The lungs expel [...] air with rapidly succeeding pauses, and thus produce a movement that is conducive to health, which alone, and not what goes on in the mind, is the real cause of a gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing. – Voltaire said that Heaven has given us two things as a counterweight against the many burdens of life: *hope* and *sleep*. He could also have added *laughter*.³²

He argues that the 'gratification' of humour is a product of promoting 'life in the body' (movement in 'the viscera and the diaphragm'). We can thus 'get at the body even through the soul and use the latter as the doctor for the former'.³³

Schopenhauer's later version of the incongruity theory (1819/19, 1844) is rooted more in what takes place in the mind in response to a humorous stimulus, in particular in what he describes as opposition between 'representations of perception and abstract representations'.³⁴ Schopenhauer argues that 'the apprehension of the incongruity between what is conceived and what is perceived, i.e., reality, gives us pleasure, and we gladly give ourselves up to the spasmodic convulsion excited by this apprehension'.³⁵ The 'phenomenon of laughter always signifies' a recognition of incongruity between a conception 'and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive'. The 'greater and more unexpected this incongruity is, [...] the more violent will be [...] laughter'.³⁶ Schopenhauer thus suggests that humour arises from recognising differences between our perceptions of how the world really is (what we observe the world to be) and our abstract conceptions of it (the way in which we think of the world). To illustrate his point, he takes 'seriousness', which he sees as the 'opposite of laughter and joking' as a counter example: seriousness 'consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the concept, or the idea, with what is perceptive, with reality'. The 'serious person is convinced that he conceives things as they are, and that they are as he conceives them'. This is why the 'transition from profound seriousness to laughter is particularly easy, and can be brought about by trifles. For the more perfect that agreement, assumed by seriousness, appears to be, the more easily is it abolished, even by a trifling incongruity unexpectedly coming to light'.³⁷ To explain the pleasure of humour, Schopenhauer argues that it is the 'triumph of knowledge

³¹ Kant, p. 209.

³² Kant, p. 210.

³³ Kant, p. 209.

³⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume II* (1819/19, 1844), trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 91.

³⁵ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

³⁶ Schopenhauer, p. 91.

³⁷ Schopenhauer, p. 99.

of perception over thought' that 'gives us pleasure'. That is, it is enjoyable to find that our perception is correct, for 'In the case of that suddenly appearing contrast between the perceived and the conceived, the perceived is always undoubtedly in the right, for it is in no way subject to error, and needs no confirmation from outside' (it comes into conflict with 'what is thought' because 'abstract concepts, cannot come down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of what is perceived').³⁸ It is, he suggests, 'delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy'.³⁹

The final philosopher conventionally seen as key to the incongruity theory is Kierkegaard. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard proposes that 'where there is contradiction the comic is present. The tragic and the comic are the same in so far as both are contradiction; but *the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comic the painless contradiction*'.⁴⁰ Kierkegaard devotes a considerable amount of space to explaining this idea via examples. Caricature, for example, he says is comic because it involves 'contradiction between likeness and unlikeness. The caricature must resemble a person, in fact an actual, particular person. If it does not, it is not comic but a straightforward exercise in meaningless fantasy'.⁴¹

Diverging from incongruity theories, meanwhile, relief theories of humour suggest that amusement functions to vent emotional tension, to circumvent censorship and repression, and/or to assuage experiences such as anxiety and distress. Such interest in humour's capacity to offer relief is most closely associated with Sigmund Freud, but there were earlier proponents. Anthony, Lord Shaftesbury, for instance, in his 1709 'Sensus Communis: an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour', had argued that 'the natural free Spirits of ingenious Men, if imprison'd and controul'd', will 'find out other ways of Motion to relieve themselves' and 'whether it be in Burlesque, Mimickry or Buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves'.⁴² He proposes that 'If Men are forbid to speak their minds seriously on certain Subjects, they will do it ironically [...] And thus *Raillery* is brought more in fashion'.⁴³ Shaftesbury argues that 'buffoonery' is greatest where 'constraint' is most severe.⁴⁴ He suggests that the evidence for this lies in countries in which 'Tyranny is highest', that the greatest constraints lead to 'Buffoonery and Burlesque' being 'in the highest vogue'.⁴⁵ Herbert Spencer in his essay 'On the Physiology of Laughter' (1860) puts forward a relief theory of humour explicitly in opposition to understandings based on incongruity. He notes that the 'usual reply' to questions of why we smile or laugh is that 'risibility is excited by a perception of incongruity'. Spencer identifies the

³⁸ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

³⁹ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

⁴⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), ed. by Alastair Hannay, (Cambridge UP, 2009), pp. 431–33.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, p. 433, n. ii.

⁴² Anthony, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, 'Sensus Communis; an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour', in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1709) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), pp. 37–94, (p. 46).

⁴³ Shaftesbury, p. 46.

⁴⁴ Shaftesbury, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Shaftesbury, p. 47.

‘obvious criticism’ that ‘laughter often occurs from extreme pleasure or from mere vivacity’, but is more interested in addressing the issue of ‘Why, when greatly delighted, or impressed with certain unexpected contrasts of ideas, should there be a contraction of particular facial muscles and particular muscles of the chest?’⁴⁶ Basing his thoughts on ‘the truth that bodily activity deadens emotion’, Spencer proposes that ‘laughter is a display of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law, that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action’.⁴⁷ He states that a ‘discharge of nervous energy into the muscular system’, will convulse ‘not only certain of the articulatory and vocal muscles, but also those which expel air from the lungs’.⁴⁸

Freud, the most prominent relief theorist, argues that comedy and jokes save mental energy: in all types of humour ‘the pleasure is derived from an economy’. Identifying three different types of mirthful pleasure (jokes, comedy, and humour), Freud suggests that ‘Pleasure in the joke’ comes from ‘an economy in expenditure upon inhibition’, comic pleasure from ‘an economy in expenditure upon ideation’, and humorous pleasure ‘from an economy in expenditure upon feeling’.⁴⁹ Freud uses clowning as an example of the comic: we laugh at the movements of clowns because we see them as being ‘extravagant and inexpedient’. By ‘making a comparison [...] between the movement I observe in the other person and the one that I should have carried out myself’; we exert psychic energy in imagining the overly large, ‘extravagant’ movements of the clowns but, realising that such movements are unnecessarily large, we expel the extra psychic energy we have summoned in the form of laughter.⁵⁰ ‘Hostile’ (or ‘tendentious’) jokes, meanwhile – jokes that save expenditure on inhibition – ‘make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way’. They ‘circumvent’ such obstacles, and in doing so ‘draw pleasure from a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible’. (The ‘obstacle’ in his illustration, for example, is ‘nothing other than women’s incapacity to tolerate undisguised sexuality’).⁵¹ This kind of joking thus ‘*will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*’ (emphasis in the original).⁵² Freud argues that comedy is ruined if interrupted by our feelings, whereas his category of humour ‘is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place’.⁵³ Pleasure emerges from humour ‘at the cost’ of a ‘release of affect that does not occur: it arises from *an economy in the expenditure of affect*’.⁵⁴ He suggests that humour is ‘extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on’. The ‘kingdom of humour

⁴⁶ Herbert Spencer, “On the Physiology of Laughter”, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, March 1860, 395–402 (p. 395).

⁴⁷ Spencer, pp. 397–398.

⁴⁸ Spencer, p. 398.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), p. 236.

⁵⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 190–91.

⁵¹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

⁵² Freud, *Jokes*, p. 103.

⁵³ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 228.

⁵⁴ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 229.

is constantly being enlarged whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto unconquered emotions to the control of humour, in making them [...] into sources of humorous pleasure'.⁵⁵

There are many examples of modern psychological studies that, following from Freud, focus on the relationship between humour and assuaging negative emotion – or, to use Freud's terms, on humour and 'affect saved'. K. A. Parkhill et al's work on 'Humour, Affect and Emotion Work in Communities Living with Nuclear Risk' shows that 'humour allows the vocalization of that which is difficult to say, including affectively charged states and "real anxieties"', and that 'humour may (in part) help subjects live with risk'.⁵⁶ Madelijn Strick et al, meanwhile, conclude that 'humor may attenuate negative emotions'.⁵⁷ Lisa Kugler and Christof Kuhbandner study 'the effects of humorous reappraisal on both emotional experience and memory', finding that 'humor seems to be indeed an optimal strategy to cope with negative situations', because it 'can help us to feel better when confronted with negative stimuli, but still allows us to retrieve stimulus information later'.⁵⁸ Fay Geisler and Hannelore Weber, in addition, 'examined the affective and cognitive impact of humour on coping with self-threat', finding that 'Relative to the control condition, humour increased positive affect, while not exclusively affecting negative affect, and increased the tendency for an external attribution of failure'.⁵⁹

Play theory has also attracted large amounts of modern research, often with an anthropological focus. As Rod Martin explains it, 'With the evolution of greater intellectual and linguistic abilities, humans have adapted the laughter-generating play activities of their primate ancestors to the mental play with words and ideas that we now call humor'.⁶⁰ James Caron notes that 'Play is indeed an important activity', providing 'information for escape, defense, and suitable food, plus an opportunity for innovation [...] play can be a way to learn how to fight and bluff, sublimate aggression, develop sociability, and transmit culture'.⁶¹ Laughter and smiling fits into this kind of behaviour and learning. For instance, 'laughter and smiles function in humans and nonhuman primates' in analogous ways – 'they are both socially-based aids to learning'.⁶² One of the 'axioms' about humour that Caron puts forward is that 'successful comic events and comic artefacts possess clearly perceived play frames'.⁶³ Earlier play theories have greater cultural prominence, however, in particular Johan Huizinga's *Homo*

⁵⁵ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 231–32.

⁵⁶ K. A. Parkhill et al, 'Laughing It off? Humour, Affect and Emotion Work in Communities Living with Nuclear Risk', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 62 (2011), 324–46 (p. 343).

⁵⁷ Madelijn Strick, Rob W. Holland, Rick B. van Baaren, and Ad van Knippenberg, 'Finding Comfort in a Joke: Consolatory Effects of Humor Through Cognitive Distraction', *Emotion*, 9 (2009), 574–78 (p. 574).

⁵⁸ Lisa Kugler and Christof Kuhbandner, 'That's Not Funny! – But It Should Be: Effects of Humorous Emotion Regulation on Emotional Experience and Memory', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015).

⁵⁹ Fay Geisler and Hannelore Weber, 'Harm That Does Not Hurt: Humour in Coping with Self-Threat', *Motivation and Emotion*, 34 (2010), 446–56 (p. 447).

⁶⁰ Rod Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier, 2007), p. 3.

⁶¹ James Caron, 'From ethology to aesthetics: Evolution as a theoretical paradigm for research on laughter, humor, and other comic phenomena', *Humor*, 15 (2002), 245–281 (p. 263).

⁶² Caron, p. 259.

⁶³ Caron, p. 274.

Ludens (1938) and Max Eastman's *Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936). Huizinga is interested not in the 'why and the wherefore of play', departing from 'the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play', and emphasising 'the *fun* of playing'.⁶⁴ Summarising play as he sees it, Huizinga says it is:

a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world.⁶⁵

Huizinga proposes that 'Homo Ludens, Man the Player, deserves a place in our nomenclature', the object of his study being 'to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play', to 'try to integrate the concept of play into that of culture'.⁶⁶ He suggests that 'play is one of the main bases of civilisation'.⁶⁷ Play 'produces many of the fundamental forms of social life':

The spirit of playful competition is [...] older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and forms derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play-patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phase, played. It does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it.⁶⁸

Given that play can be seen as being so central to all aspects of culture and society, it is unsurprising that the Great War should give rise to multiple examples of humorous texts offering entertainment. Even so, humour and play are not indistinguishable: 'Children's games, football, and chess', Huizinga observes, 'are played in profound seriousness; the players have not the slightest inclination to laugh', and play 'is not comical either for player or public'.⁶⁹

Such a distinction suggests that humour might better be understood as a particular kind of play, and/or that a playful mood or context is necessary for the production of mirth. This is how humour has elsewhere been associated with play, including in Eastman's work. Eastman proposes that, first, 'it is

⁶⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), pp. 2–3.

⁶⁵ Huizinga, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Huizinga, Foreword (1938), in *Homo Ludens*.

⁶⁷ Huizinga, p. 4.

⁶⁸ Huizinga, p. 173.

⁶⁹ Huizinga, p. 6.

necessary to be, or become, playful in order to perceive anything whatever as funny’ and, second, that ‘In everything that we do perceive as funny there is an element which, if we were serious and sufficiently sensitive, and *sufficiently concerned*, would be unpleasant’.⁷⁰ We find ‘things [...] funny’, he argues, ‘only when we are in fun’ (in the mode of playfulness) and ‘when we are in fun [...] Pleasant things are still pleasant, but disagreeable things, so long as they are not disagreeable enough to “spoil the fun”, tend to [...] provoke a laugh’. Whereas playfulness ‘is a condition most natural to childhood’, in which ‘every untoward, unprepared for [...] or otherwise shocking and disturbing thing [...] is enjoyable as funny’, adults ‘retain in varying degrees this aptitude for being in fun, and thus enjoying unpleasant things as funny’.⁷¹ A similar position emerges in Morreall’s more recent explanation of humour. Morreall’s model of amusement consists of several stages: we ‘experience a cognitive shift – a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts’ – this experience is similar to that described in incongruity theories; we are ‘in a play mode rather than a serious mode, disengaged from conceptual and practical concerns’; as a result, we do not respond ‘to the cognitive shift with shock, confusion, puzzlement, fear, anger, or other negative emotions, we enjoy it’; and, finally, we express this pleasure in laughter, ‘which signals to others that they can relax and play too’.⁷² Humorous genres – comic periodicals or performances, for example – may encourage a ‘play mode’: when soldiers opened trench newspapers, for instance, they expected to be ‘disengaged’ from serious concerns. This helps to explain why the incongruities presented in these publications, such as comic anthropomorphism, prompt amusement rather than negative feelings. Hence, as already explained, I have included texts labelled as comic in my definition of what constitutes a humorous Great War text.

Importantly, several problems have been raised with older versions of the classic theories in particular. As has been seen, it is not the case that amusement necessarily arises as a result of recognising superiority, and similar objections apply to some incongruity theories. As Morreall puts it, ‘they said or implied that the mere perception of incongruity is sufficient for humor. That is clearly false, since negative emotions like fear, disgust, and anger are also reactions to what violates our mental patterns and expectations’. The experience of ‘something incongruous can also evoke puzzlement or incredulity’.⁷³ More specific objections include, for instance, Michael Clark’s rebuttal of the idea found in incongruity theories that humour arises from ‘frustrated expectation’: ‘the humour of many comedy situations depends on the audience’s knowing precisely what is going to happen’.⁷⁴ In addition, Freud’s work has been criticised, for example, for being reductive and for lacking evidence – particularly with regard to his claims about the mechanisms of saving and expending psychic energy.⁷⁵ Michael North comments of Freud’s energy-saving model that ‘As a literalization, it seems to make the mind into a

⁷⁰ Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 21.

⁷¹ Eastman, p. 3.

⁷² Morreall, p. 50.

⁷³ Morreall, pp. 12–13.

⁷⁴ Michael Clark, ‘Humour and Incongruity’, *Philosophy*, 45 (1970), 20–32 (p. 22).

⁷⁵ John Lippitt, ‘Humour and Release’, *Cogito*, 9 (1995), 169–76.

hydraulic system working at a fixed pressure, more or less like household plumbing'.⁷⁶ As is suggested by the continuation of modern psychological research into humour's positive emotional effects, however, the broad premises of the relief theory continue to provide insights into the emotional work that humour performs.

Despite their problems, classic theories of humour are useful for elucidating how texts might provoke audiences to be mirthful, since they are focused on explaining why mirth and laughter arise, and I use them in conjunction with close attention to literary-historical context to demonstrate how humour contributes to the depiction of the war. Salvatore Attardo comments that 'Ultimately the very things that people find humorous seems to change', such that humour can only be 'understood in a historical perspective': this has led to a 'not unjustified pessimism' about 'the very possibility of finding a common ground of analysis among the many socio-historical manifestations of humor, let alone a determination of the necessary and sufficient conditions for humor to obtain'.⁷⁷ Similarly, Thomas Oden proposes that 'Comic perception is often subtly geared to its own distinctive culture and language', being 'difficult to transpose and not always easily translatable'.⁷⁸ In recognition of this, and of the diversity of humour in Great War writing, I do not advocate one all-encompassing theory of humour, instead treating humour as historically and generically specific. I combine classic theories of humour – using these to explain how texts invite amusement, and how this affects the picture of the war created – with a historical approach to Great War humour, placing this humour in the context of early twentieth-century literary culture. This specificity reveals the relationship between humorous wartime literature and earlier comic writing, illuminating the ways in which established kinds of literary humour were sufficiently robust and adaptable to be deployed in the depiction of the war, the ways in which Great War humour interacted with other aspects of the culture of the time, and the contexts of literary production and changing readerships.

My chapters are each dedicated to individual genres and to different kinds of humour that are especially widespread and/or striking features of those genres, though these connections between types of writing and types of humour are tendencies rather than exclusive links. Incongruity theories offer explanations of why the war being depicted as odd or bizarre might provoke mirth, and have especially resonant connections with the texts that I explore in Chapter One, which centres on the traditions of comic absurdity as they arise in wartime poetry. My chosen texts invite humour via the presentation of incongruities, and theories which focus on such absurdities help to explain this process. Of particular interest here is, first, Kant's argument that incongruities provoke laughter because, when confronted with them, the mind is unable to make sense of them, leading to it 'oscillating' in a way that is reflected in the concrete bodily movement of laughter.⁷⁹ Schopenhauer's thinking about humour applies in a similar way, especially his position that the pleasure of humour lies in seeing the reason as being

⁷⁶ Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 14.

⁷⁷ Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994) p. 7.

⁷⁸ Thomas Oden, *The Humor of Kierkegaard* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), p. 2.

⁷⁹ Kant, p. 209.

‘inadequa[te]’.⁸⁰ Henri Bergson’s work, furthermore, which is often classed as an incongruity theory, helps to elucidate how the comic tensions discussed in Chapter Two, which focuses on trench newspapers and ‘machine-age’ comedy, add to portrayals of the military’s mechanistic workings. In Chapter Three, I employ Hobbes’ and Roger Scruton’s ideas, both of which are frequently categorised as superiority theories, to explain how self-deprecating, insouciant, stoical humour in short stories by service authors contributes to their sympathetic characterisation, and to forming senses of national identity. The idea that humour offers relief, meanwhile, is the interpretation most frequently found in the field of First World War studies (see the literature review in the following section). My use of Freud’s theory of humour in Chapter Four partially reflects this: I employ Freud to demonstrate how theatrical humour invites amusement in response to war experiences that might otherwise cause distress. In addition, though, I position such humour within the workings of the wartime theatrical industry: the ways in which amusement supplants disquiet, and opens up sources of pleasure that may otherwise be blocked by repression, helped to negotiate the restrictions of official and self-censorship.

There are some identifiable reasons, relating to the contexts in which texts were written and published, why certain genres are associated with specific kinds of humour. Trench newspapers, first, reproduced and updated the kinds of humorous articles, stories, anecdotes, and jokes that appeared in comic periodicals popular from the mid-nineteenth century. Such a mixture of repetition and adaptation is a key feature of machine-age comedy, a kind of humour that arises from reproduction. This type of comedy, in addition, can emerge from contrasts between that which is mechanical and regulated and that which is more organic and eccentric, reflecting the challenge recruits faced as individuals becoming part of the military machine. Second, the setting of the popular national press contributed to the appearance in short magazine fiction of insouciant, stoical ‘British’ humour. Popular periodicals cultivated exclusive senses of national identity, and this included articulating associations between humour and Britishness. I reveal a mutually reinforcing interplay between the notions of British humour expressed in periodicals and representations of servicemen in wartime short stories as being amused, aloof, and phlegmatic. Third, when analysing theatrical writing, I explain how humorous representations of home-front experiences held in balance that which had the potential to be emotionally and politically incendiary, with that which was ‘safe’. These effects of humour grew out of the contested space of the theatre, which was characterised by tensions between imperatives to address concerns of the day and to circumvent censorship. Finally, humorous absurdity runs through a variety of different examples of Great War poetry, though here it is less clear why there is a connection between this particular genre and style of humour. One potential reason for the link is traceable via literary nonsense, a close relative of humorous absurdity. Nonsense is often associated with poetry, especially in the form of limericks and nursery rhymes, and the playfulness and ‘topsy-turvy’ quality found in the Great War poems discussed develops from this tradition.

⁸⁰ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

There is not room in this thesis to afford dedicated space to all relevant types of humour. Whole chapters could have been devoted to satire, comic irony, whimsy, humour that emerges from xenophobia and racism, and humour based on normative notions of gender and sexuality. The latter of these feature locally in my chapter on theatre, in which I demonstrate how humour variously interrogates and reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates homophobic stereotypes. Racist humour does surface in Great War literature, for example there is some amusement at the idiosyncrasies of Indian English, and Irish jokes too are sometimes a feature.⁸¹ Xenophobic ridicule of enemy belligerents, meanwhile, usually confined to Germany and more often Wilhelm II specifically, is prominent in the conflict's writing, and there is also a large amount of satire directed against the U.S. before President Wilson's declaration of war in 1917. Because these kinds of jokes are not the most pervasive, I have not allocated whole chapters to them. They are, though, noted where applicable, and the notions of inclusion and exclusion they imply are elucidated in my discussion of national humour in Chapter Three. Both satire and whimsy, meanwhile, occur across quite a number of the texts considered, sometimes side-by-side. To give just a few examples, the former manifests itself in the 'grousing' (complaining) about rules and conditions in trench journals, in Shaw's political commentary in his war plays, and in representations of over-zealous patriotism in short stories. Whimsy is found, for instance, in the human-animal reversals that arise in First World War poetry and trench newspapers, and is especially a feature of Barrie's work. The many different types of humour that feature in Great War literature – not only whimsy, satire, and racist and xenophobic joking but also comic irony, wryness, wit, drollery, silliness, and more – are thus acknowledged where relevant and feasible. This thesis cannot be an exhaustive study of humour in First World War literature. It does, however, uncover and illuminate some of the most striking, widespread, surprising, and subtle ways in which humour was used to represent the conflict, establishing humour as a crucial element of the conflict's literary portrayal.

0.2 First World War Humour: Beyond the Anomalous and the Psychological.

This thesis intervenes in existing Great War scholarship in a number of areas. Despite movements towards expanding the canon of First World War literature beyond works by the famous trench lyricists, modern anthologists and critics for the most part devote little space to humorous portrayals of the war. When such portrayals are addressed, they are generally seen as a form of emotional relief. My analysis moves away from focusing on humour's role as a psychological coping mechanism, instead offering a discussion of the ways in which humour helped to create nuanced, varied pictures of the war. I show the importance of writing that contrasts the kinds of Great War texts that are normally privileged in public and scholarly discussions of the conflict's literature, challenging dominant perceptions that the war was depicted primarily, or only, via descriptions of immense hardship, bitterness, and horror. My argument that styles of humorous writing established before the war endured into depictions of the conflict in

⁸¹ Graham Seal, *The Soldiers' Press: Trench Journals in the First World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 181–82. See, for example: R. F. White, 'A Territorial in India', *Punch*, 7 April 1915, p. 266.

addition complicates a persistent belief that new forms of representation were required to register the experience, or ‘reality’, of the conflict.

Underlying many discussions of Great War literature is the now well-known concept of the war myth. This is the narrative that still dominates popular thinking about the conflict, despite the many attempts of historians and literary scholars to complicate it.⁸² According to the myth, in Samuel Hynes’ neat summary:

a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war [...]. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned [...]. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance.⁸³

The most detailed explanation of how the war myth gained popularity in Britain is Dan Todman’s *The Great War, Myth and Memory* (2005). As part of his analysis Todman demonstrates that there has been a disproportionate focus on a limited number of poets who highlighted the ‘horrors’ of the Western Front. He reserves particularly biting criticism for Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), in which Fussell, with reference to a small number of canonical authors and carefully chosen writings from other servicemen, argues that the conflict brought about a new ‘ironic’ mode in literature.⁸⁴ Concerns with Fussell’s work have been articulated and reiterated in multiple examples of Great War scholarship. As Kate McLoughlin points out in her 2014 reassessment of the 1975 work, Fussell has provoked condemnation for his ‘narrow interpretation of the conflict’, his ‘historical

⁸² A full survey of current perceptions of the war would be a lengthy project in itself, but a brief look at reporting on the centenary is instructive. There is some evidence to suggest erosion of the war myth. A 2016 *Independent* article about the Battle of the Somme presents the fighting in balanced terms; its author describes the battle’s costs and what it achieved. Many more reports contrast this approach, however. A 2017 *Guardian* article reports a call for people to remember ‘the horrors of the battlefield’, and characterises attrition warfare as futile. Similarly, a 2016 *Sun* report headlined ‘Horror in the Trenches’ highlighted the ‘casualty figures that epitomise this pointless war’, and included a section entitled ‘Lions led by donkeys’. Responses to the recent film adaptation of *Journey’s End* illustrate that the conflict is still understood as being a matter of mud, blood, and horror. Reviewers expressed a sense of fatigue with the subject of the war, asking why there was any need to once again depict the misery it involved. With the exception of attention to the *Wipers Times*, humorous war writing from the 1914–18 period has not seen a resurgence. See: Matt Payton, ‘Battle of the Somme Centenary: What Happened and Why It Is the Defining British Battle of the First World War?’, *The Independent*, 2016 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/world-war-one-somme-centenary-what-happened-and-why-it-is-the-defining-british-first-world-war-a7108231.html>> [accessed 25 June 2017]; ‘Passchendaele Battle Centenary Events to Be Held in Belgium’, *The Guardian*, 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/03/passchendaele-battle-centenary-events-belgium>> [accessed 25 June 2017]; Maryse Farag, ‘Horror in the Trenches’, *The Sun*, 2016 <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/living/1356590/20000-brits-died-on-just-the-first-day-and-19-other-number-crunching-facts-that-will-horrify-you-about-the-battle-of-the-somme/>> [accessed 25 June 2017]. For reviews of *Journey’s End*, see: Geoffrey Macnab, ‘Film Reviews Round-Up’, *The Independent*, 31 January 2018 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/film-reviews-roundup-roman-j-israel-esq-journeys-end-den-of-thieves-a8187296.html>> [accessed 12 February 2018]; ‘Saturday Review’, BBC Radio 4, 3 February 2018, produced by Oliver Jones.

⁸³ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. x.

⁸⁴ Todman, pp. 158–59; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975).

inaccuracies and generalisations’, and his ‘insistence upon combat experience as the only basis on which truly to know the war’.⁸⁵ There have been reactions against these kinds of assessments, for instance Randall Stevenson, seemingly uncomfortable from a moral standpoint with scholarship that moves away from the association between the war and suffering, writes that ‘there is little reason to think that revisionist history in the twenty-first century will – or *should* – do more than qualify the “collective narrative”’ (my emphasis).⁸⁶ However, given that both the war myth and Fussell’s work have been so roundly contested, the most pertinent judgement is summed-up in McLoughlin’s comment that the ‘shortcomings’ of Fussell’s book have ‘proved as influential’ as its merits.⁸⁷

One notable response has been movement away from the view that styles of writing labelled traditional were not able to depict the conflict adequately, Fussell having argued that in the 1914–18 period people lacked ‘new idioms’ of modernism that might have ‘done the job better’.⁸⁸ Tim Kendall explains how Georgian poetry, which gained prominence in 1912 following the publication of the first *Georgian Poetry* anthology, has often been misguidedly dismissed as ‘ill equipped to face the trauma of mass technological warfare’. The famous soldier-poets have been seen as ‘*shell-shocked* Georgians, their aesthetic assumptions having rendered them particularly vulnerable to the front’s unimagined brutalities’ (his emphasis). Modernists, he points out, have conversely been viewed as ‘experimenters, responding with appropriate urgency to a broken world’.⁸⁹ Kendall is not alone in challenging the idea that established forms of art were antithetical to rendering the Great War. Most prominently, Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) questions the perspective according to which the war made dominant a new, ‘truth-telling’ language that fed into modernist literature and art, challenging the war myth according to which the conflict created a rift with pre-war culture.⁹⁰ Winter demonstrates that the ‘rupture’ of the 1914–18 years was not as extreme as has been supposed, that overlap between the ‘old and the new, the “traditional” and the “modern”, the conservative and the iconoclastic, was apparent both during and after the war’.⁹¹

⁸⁵ McLoughlin, ‘New Impressions XVI: The Great War and Modern Memory’, *Essays in Criticism*, 64 (2014), 436–58 (p. 436).

⁸⁶ Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), p. 201.

⁸⁷ McLoughlin, ‘New Impressions’, p. 437.

⁸⁸ Fussell, p. 174.

⁸⁹ Tim Kendall, ‘Introduction’, *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. xv–xxvii (p. xvii). Some critics have discussed humour and modernism (and/or modernity), but this tends not to include reflection on humour, modernism, and the Great War. Vincent Sherry’s work is an exception. Discussing the idea that modernism in Britain reflected the distorted reasoning used to justify the conflict, he mentions that ‘The need to make sensible a policy previously deemed irrational often plays out as a kind of involuntary comedy’. Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 11. On comedy and modernism, see: Matthew Bevis, ‘Eliot Among the Comedians’, *Literary Imagination*, 16 (2014), 135–56; James English, ‘Modernist Joke Work: “Pale Fire” and the Mock Transcendence of Mockery’, *Contemporary Literature*, 33 (1992), 74–90; Laura Mooneyham, ‘Comedy Among the Modernists: P. G. Wodehouse and the Anachronism of Comic Form’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40 (1994), 114–38; North; Tullio Pagano, ‘Modernisms: From Bergson’s Laughter to Pirandello’s Humour’, *The Italianist*, 17 (1997), 44–59.

⁹⁰ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 1–3.

⁹¹ Winter, *Sites*, p. 3. Trudi Tate makes a similar point in *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998), p. 4.

There have also been widespread, influential efforts to increase the range of works deemed to be ‘First World War literature’. This has included greater attention to genres other than poetry – as in Ann-Marie Einhaus’ *The Short Story and the First World War* (2013) and Mark Rawlinson’s *First World War Plays* (2014) – and a move towards non-combatant and civilian writers with such volumes as Catherine Reilly’s *Scars Upon my Heart* (1981).⁹² Santanu Das, writing in 2013 about Great War poetry, points towards a ‘quiet but powerful expansion of the canon over the last three decades’, which has led to the recovery of poetry by ‘women, civilians, dissenters, working-class and non-English’ writers.⁹³ James Campbell and Stevenson make similar observations, noting how the focus on trench lyricists such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon established in the 1960s has been challenged by attention to lesser-known writers. Indeed, Stevenson argues that considering authors who are largely unknown today could counteract the almost automatic responses now prompted by the most familiar texts of the war.⁹⁴ These perspectives on expanding the canon of Great War writing react against powerful and longstanding associations between the most famous war literature and the representation of the conflict’s ‘truth’. As Todman explains, a ‘tradition’ has emerged according to which the celebrated war poets – most notably Owen – are seen as ‘communicat[ing] “the truth” about war’, with alternative points of view being dismissed or overlooked.⁹⁵ Conducting research into diverse, alternative perspectives is based on and promotes the premise that texts other than those of the famous war poets are worth studying for the pictures of the conflict they present.⁹⁶

While the expansion of the field has increased the diversity of writers explored, however, there has not been an equally extensive enlargement when it comes to humorous writing. Despite a steady movement towards broader selection, there has been relatively little interest in humorous texts, with inclusion of amusing literature remaining limited in critical studies and anthologies, though both of these forms of scholarship do offer glimpses into the large body of humorous works produced in response to the conflict. One of the dramas from the 1914–18 period that Rawlinson selects for his volume of war plays is Allan Monkhouse’s *Night Watches* (1916), a comedy about a hospital orderly and two patients.⁹⁷ Trudi Tate’s *Women, Men and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories* (1995), Barbara Korte and Einhaus’ *Penguin Book of First World War Short Stories* (2007), and Andrew Maunder’s *British*

⁹² Poetry dominates the discussion and publication of Great War literature because it was abundant, often aesthetically powerful, and frequently less topical and more universal in outlook. Ann-Marie Einhaus, *The Short Story and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 3, 4, 16–17; Mark Rawlinson, ed., *First World War Plays* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014); Catherine Reilly, ed., *Scars Upon my Heart* (London: Virago, 1981).

⁹³ Santanu Das, ‘Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 3–34 (pp. 4–6).

⁹⁴ James Campbell, ‘Interpreting the War’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. by Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2005), pp. 261–79; Stevenson, pp. 182–83.

⁹⁵ Todman, p. 172.

⁹⁶ Despite the advances described above, in his most recent work (2017) Winter maintains the focus on Owen and Sassoon in his 1995 monograph. Referring to the argument that ‘Owen and company’ did not represent all servicemen, he writes ‘Whether or not these claims are true is beside the point. What matters is that the words of the [canonical] war poets reverberated’. Winter, *War beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), pp. 94–95, 97.

⁹⁷ Allan Monkhouse, *Night Watches* (1916), in Rawlinson, pp. 41–58.

Literature of World War I: The Short Story and the Novella (2011) between them contain a few humorous stories, texts that point towards a much larger corpus of amusing short fiction.⁹⁸ Some poetry collections have no humorous texts, or a few satirical poems. These volumes include Jon Silkin's *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1978), David Roberts' *Minds at War: the Poetry and Experience of the First World War* (1996), and Dominic Hibberd and John Onions' *Poetry of the Great War: An Anthology* (1986), although the latter editors in their introduction do note that some soldiers' poetry comprises of humorous grousing, and spend time criticising anthologies that have propagated the war myth.⁹⁹ Others incorporate a tantalising smattering of amusing works. Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914–1918* (1964) includes Edward Shanks' 'The Old Soldiers' (1916), which humorously imagines the eponymous characters going back into training, while Andrew Motion's *First World War Poems* (2003) has six soldiers' songs.¹⁰⁰ Elsewhere, and to different extents, editors of poetry anthologies select humorous texts as part of a more explicit project of challenging popular views of the war and its poetry. George Walter in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (2006) criticises the privileging of poems that stress 'the horrors of the war', and includes approximately ten poems that have elements of humour, several of which are soldiers' songs, in his anthology of over 200 poems.¹⁰¹ Kendall laments in particular how poems by civilians and non-combatants have been marginalised, and his *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology* (2013), a collection of 188 texts, contains fifteen music-hall and trench songs.¹⁰² John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville's *Tommy Rot: WWI Poetry They Didn't Let You Read* (2013), as its title suggests, is presented as a popular selection of alternative poems, a substantial number of which are humorous; and Martin Stephen in *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence* (1988) chooses some amusing texts with the aim of presenting a more representative selection than previous anthologies.¹⁰³ Finally, Vivien Noakes' *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (2006) is the main exception to the focus on solemn texts found in most scholarly anthologies, affording an unusual amount of space to humorous poetry, unsurprisingly given her interest and expertise in Edward Lear's work. She builds her collection from texts originally printed in, for example, trench newspapers, hospital journals, scrapbooks, albums, magazines, and postcards

⁹⁸ Tate, ed., *Women, Men and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories* (Manchester, Manchester UP, 1995); Barbara Korte and Einhaus, eds., *The Penguin Book of First World War Stories* (London: Penguin, 2007); Andrew Maunder, *British Literature of World War I: The Short Story and the Novella* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011).

⁹⁹ Jon Silkin, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1979); David Roberts, ed., *Minds at War: The Poetry and Experience of The First World War* (Hurst: Saxon Books, 1996); Dominic Hibberd and John Onions, 'Introduction', *Poetry of the Great War: An Anthology*, ed. by Dominic Hibberd and John Onions (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 1–33 (pp. 3–6, 24).

¹⁰⁰ Edward Shanks, 'The Old Soldiers', in *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914–18*, ed. by Brian Gardner (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 16; Andrew Motion, ed., *First World War Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), pp. 61–67.

¹⁰¹ George Walter, 'Introduction', *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by George Walter (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. viii–liv (p. xxxii).

¹⁰² Kendall, *Poetry*, pp. xxii, 221–32.

¹⁰³ John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville, eds., *Tommy Rot: World War One Poetry They Didn't Let You Read* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), pp. 21, 29, 30, 48, 54, 62–63; Martin Stephen, ed., *Poems of the First World War: Never Such Innocence* (London: Everyman, 1988), pp. xiv, 291–22.

and, because of this eclectic approach, the volume is an exceptionally useful source of amusing war poems.¹⁰⁴

Attention to humorous First World War literature in scholarship beyond anthologies is rare and, where it has been analysed, the focus has been on the psychological importance of amusement, especially as a means for understanding wartime morale and social history.¹⁰⁵ Introducing a special issue of the *Journal of European Studies* on 'War in the Twentieth Century: the Functioning of Humour in Cultural Representation' (2001), Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly suggest that humour is important for 'coping with life in difficult and stressful situations'.¹⁰⁶ As part of this issue Pierre Purseigle studies First World War cartoons from British and French newspapers with a focus on what they say about difficulties such as housing problems and wartime regulations, arguing that the public voicing of concerns reduced anxiety. Jean-Yves Le Naour suggests that humour and laughter in wartime France helped to dissipate fear and anguish, humour being 'mobilised' in support of the war, for example, by the provision of theatrical entertainment for troops. Andrew Robertshaw, meanwhile, proposes that humourists in the forces would have been particularly valued for their ability to raise spirits.¹⁰⁷ Outside this special issue, but in a similar vein, Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff write in the introduction to their edited volume, entitled *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I* (2015), that humour was a 'coping mechanism to deal with loss and trauma, hopelessness, and dread'.¹⁰⁸ Alex Watson, in addition, demonstrates that both British and German servicemen used humour to make their situation appear less intimidating, correcting J. G. Fuller's suggestion that this use of humour was a trait more particular to the British forces.¹⁰⁹ Fuller's claim is made in his detailed study based on British trench newspapers, which sources he uses to investigate how servicemen maintained good morale, and Graham Seal likewise argues that trench journals answer the question of how so many men endured the war for several years.¹¹⁰ Finally, Noakes states in her introduction to *Voices of Silence* that servicemen used amusement to 'make more bearable the shared tragedy of their suffering', though

¹⁰⁴ Noakes, ed., *Voices of Silence: The Alternative Book of First World War Poetry* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰⁵ Jakub Kazecki takes a different approach to German Great War writing: examining depictions of humour, he argues, for example, that 'social relationships' in some narratives are 'expressed, and influenced by humour and laughter'. (Jakub Kazecki, *Laughter in the Trenches: Humour and Front Experience in German First World War Narratives* [Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012], pp. 2, 5).

¹⁰⁶ Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly, 'Introduction. War in the Twentieth Century: The Functioning of Humour in Cultural Representation', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), 247–63 (pp. 247–49).

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Purseigle, 'Mirroring Societies at War: Pictorial Humour in the British and French Popular Press during the First World War', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), 289–328; Jean-Yves Le Naour, 'Laughter and Tears in the Great War: The Need for Laughter/the Guilt of Humour', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), 265–75; Andrew Robertshaw, "'Irrepressible Chirpy Cockney Chappies"? Humour as an Aid to Survival', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), 277–87 (p. 280).

¹⁰⁸ Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, 'Introduction', Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, pp. 1–22 (p. 3).

¹⁰⁹ Alex Watson, 'Self-Deception and Survival: Mental Coping Strategies on the Western Front, 1914–18', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), 247–68.

¹¹⁰ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 175; Seal, p. xi.

she also argues that her selected texts have literary merit and offer fresh perspectives on the conflict, two claims that are made more extensively of the humorous works in this thesis.¹¹¹

Elsewhere, references to humour appear in passing, on the periphery of wider discussion. *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity* (2018), a volume edited by Das and McLoughlin that brings together major scholars in recent Great War criticism, includes exploration of Charlie Chaplin's 1916 film *Zepped* as part of a broader consideration of zeppelins in representations of the war, and Rawlinson's contribution makes reference to the humour in Lewis' memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937).¹¹² In a different volume, furthermore, when giving an overview of Great War poetry, Das points out that limericks and satires might now be called 'war poetry', though he goes on to express wariness about expanding the label in this direction because of concerns about literary quality.¹¹³ Other references to Great War humour include Modris Eksteins' recognition of its presence in the *Wipers Times*, and Stevenson's suggestion that there is 'more potential' for comic responses to the war than 'might be expected': he comments that 'jest and popular song' offer fresh points of view on the conflict.¹¹⁴ Fussell also raises the subject of humour, though not via reference to texts from the 1914–18 period: he quotes war reporter Phillip Gibbs, writing in 1920, as saying that black humour was popular during the war, and he argues that 'farce and comedy' are important in Robert Graves' memoir *Good-Bye to All That* (1929).¹¹⁵ A greater focus on humorous works, as its title suggests, appears in Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff's volume. Several chapters offer valuable insights into specific aspects of wartime entertainment, such as John Mullen's explanation of how existing music-hall traditions were adapted to the wartime situation (a perspective that chimes with my own analysis), Felicia Hardison Londré's history of the 'Over There Theatre League' performing for U.S. troops, and Jenna Kubly's recognition that Barrie's wartime plays had 'critical merit' and addressed a variety of wartime experiences.¹¹⁶ There is also material that goes beyond the Anglophone sphere and the 1914–18 period, such as discussion of the comic novel *Alf's Button* (1920), humour in the marketing of Hollywood films during the conflict, Walter Bloem's *Vormarsch* (1916), and cartoons.

What is striking about some of the scholarship mentioned above is a tendency to link humour with the painful aspects of the conflict, to move humour into the sphere of suffering. Examining humour for its psychological and emotional benefits necessarily relates it to experiences from which relief is

¹¹¹ Noakes, 'Introduction', *Voices*, pp. xi–xviii (pp. xi–xii).

¹¹² Christine Froula, 'The Zeppelin in the Sky of the Mind', in *The First World War: Literature, Culture, Modernity*, ed. by Das and McLoughlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), pp. 128–53 (pp. 143–44); Rawlinson, 'Dissent and the Literature of the First World War: Wyndham Lewis and Henry Williamson', in Das and McLoughlin, pp. 154–72 (pp. 161–64).

¹¹³ Das, 'Reframing', p. 8.

¹¹⁴ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), pp. 221–22; Stevenson, pp. 77, 184–85.

¹¹⁵ Fussell, pp. 8, 203–04.

¹¹⁶ John Mullen, "'You Can't Help Laughing, Can You?'" Humor and Symbolic Empowerment in British Music Hall Song during the Great War', in *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I*, ed. by Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen Ritzenhoff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 181–96; Felicia Hardison Londré, 'The Range of Laughter: First Person Reports from Entertainers of the Over There Theatre League', in Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, pp. 169–79; Jenna Kubly, 'J. M. Barrie and World War I', in Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, pp. 197–208 (p. 198).

required, connecting humour with – or making it a consequence of – distress. There is a similar pattern in those studies in which humour appears more in passing. For example, Stevenson suggests that engaging with humorous verse can be a means of making ‘less occluded by old lies’ the lives of soldiers who ‘swung and sang’ through ‘Picardy to hell’.¹¹⁷ When explaining his reasons for anthologising *Night Watches*, similarly, Rawlinson stresses its ‘tragic themes’, while Stephen presents his anthology as including comic scenes in a story that is ‘tragic in form’.¹¹⁸ This attitude to humour is also apparent in some of Sadler’s and Serdiville’s comments on the texts they include in their anthology; for example, they preface a darkly amusing trench-journal poem about a very tall soldier (‘when we’re digging trenches, Jim [...] Instead of digging four feet six, | We’ll dig them six foot two!’) with the comment ‘Despite this murderous baptism, many Territorials [...] managed to churn the horror into verse’.¹¹⁹ Eksteins characterises the humour in the *Wipers Times* as ‘black’ and ‘forced’, with some readers ‘unable to laugh’; and Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff contemplate how humour can remain ‘vivid in the most desperate situations’ and ‘help you overpower chaos and death’.¹²⁰ Fussell’s references to humour, meanwhile, are framed within his serious notion of irony (he limits irony to its tragic or cosmic variety).¹²¹ Such assessments show the influence of the war myth alongside a sense that humorous war writing lacks profundity unless it is linked to a serious function, and/or an instinct that the subject of war in general should be a solemn one – an understandable feeling that death and destruction should be incompatible with humour and the pleasurable sensation of mirth.¹²² However, these approaches have a homogenising effect, according to which individual humorous portrayals are all understood as ‘really’ being about, or at least being products of, the war’s barbarity.

One notable exception to this kind of levelling is Kendall’s article on Ivor Gurney’s poetic responses to violence and military enemies, part of which includes recognition of Gurney’s use of humour. Kendall does emphasise that Gurney ‘admits to the usefulness of humour as a coping mechanism’, that humour was ‘a reaction to extreme stress’, and that what appears to be a ‘funny poem’ from Gurney might actually be ‘a sombre poem by other means’ (he is talking about the unpublished poem ‘La Rime’).¹²³ However, Kendall goes on: ‘to argue that case is to make the poem smaller because less unsettling’ – a recognition that humour can create a sense of unease as well as of amusement – and he points out how Gurney’s use of humour resists ‘the accepted narratives of the war’. ‘In “La Rime”’, Kendall contends, ‘Gurney toys with the taboo that the violence of war, whatever else it is allowed to be, can be funny’.¹²⁴ Similarly to Kendall’s approach, my analysis confronts and elucidates the complexity of humorous First World War literature, the nuance of the pictures it creates. This thesis

¹¹⁷ Stevenson, pp. 184–85.

¹¹⁸ Rawlinson, ‘Introduction’, in Rawlinson, pp. 6–40 (pp. 12–13); Stephen, pp. xiv, 291–22.

¹¹⁹ Sadler and Serdiville, p. 55.

¹²⁰ Eksteins, pp. 221–22; Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, p. 2.

¹²¹ Fussell, pp. 7–8.

¹²² For an example of this view of humour and profundity, see Seal, who argues that, because trench newspapers helped to maintain good morale, they were ‘much more profound than simply recycling rumours, jokes, and cartoons’ (p. 12).

¹²³ Kendall, ‘Gurney and Fritz’, *Essays in Criticism*, 59 (2009), 142–56 (p. 150).

¹²⁴ Kendall, ‘Gurney’, pp. 150–51.

does not skim over the deleterious and destructive aspects of the First World War, instead including these elements of the conflict among a myriad of other war experiences. Funny, silly, frivolous, slight, sardonic, whimsical, absurd, farcical, and satirical texts offer some arresting, multifaceted, and eye-opening representations of the war.

0.3 Humour's Role in the Portrayal of the Great War.

As I have been explaining, this thesis demonstrates that humour was a key means by which writers chose to represent the war. Humour features in a surprisingly large and wide-ranging body of First World War literature, repeatedly appearing in, and often being central to, texts that belong to a variety of genres, and that were written by a diverse group of authors. The techniques associated with creating humour, the outlooks and emotions wartime humour conveyed, and the multiplicity of experiences treated in humorous literature offer fresh, engaging, and thought-provoking portrayals of life during the conflict. I highlight the durability of several different kinds of humorous writing that were popular before 1914, showing how these echoed into representations of war experience. The thriving culture of humour production that was in place before the war, in prose, poetry, periodicals, and drama, provided writers with techniques and traditions with which to create some vivid pictures of the sensations, perceptions, interactions, and ideas to arise from the conflict.

This thesis opens with a discussion of poetry, since this is the genre that has been most influential in shaping perceptions of the conflict and its literature. I establish that humorous absurdity is a key feature of a range of Great War poems, from well-known, predominantly solemn texts that hold a privileged position in the canon of First World War literature, to texts that have been excluded from it. I elucidate how humorously absurd war poems echo nineteenth- and early-twentieth century humorous writing, most prominently nonsense literature. This initiates the line of argument developed throughout this thesis that established kinds of humorous writing were durable, continuing into the 1914–18 period and being adapted for the representation of the conflict. Drawing on Kant's incongruity theory especially, I show how humorous absurdity creates pictures of the war zone as a bizarre, unfamiliar world, a world in which irrationality reigns. The war zone emerges as a space that resists logical understanding – prompting the kind of mental oscillation that Kant associates with mirth – in ways that straight, solemn accounts may be less able to effect. This feeds into the portrayal of servicemen-speakers as reacting to the war zone with amusement and wryness, creating different images of the Great War soldier-poet from those which are most familiar, a kind of emotional detachment that features in theories of humour from Kierkegaard's to Freud's and Albert Camus'.

My second chapter focuses on trench newspapers, the humorous periodicals produced by servicemen. I demonstrate how the humour in trench newspapers frequently mimics that associated with professionally-produced comic periodicals and music hall. For example, character types that were popular in these forms of entertainment before the war reappear in trench newspapers. The humour in the trench press in fact belongs to what North calls 'machine-age comedy': this is a kind of humour that

emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as Walter Benjamin identified, and that finds explanation in Bergson's theory of humour. It is characterised by a quality of reproducibility, and by the creation of contrasts between that which is mechanistic and that which is human and eccentric. Drawing on Benjamin's and North's work, I argue that machine-age humour endured into the wartime context partly because its invitations to amusement are based on reproduction, encouraging reiteration, and that this, in combination with its Bergsonian contrasts between the human and the mechanistic, made machine-age humour well fitted to portraying the relationship between individual soldier and military machine. Machine-age humour in trench newspapers involves the depiction of servicemen as falling short of the kind of heroic ideals associated during and before the Great War with military identity and service, often at the same time as propagating equally idealised suggestions that these men possessed senses of humour associated with gallantry and stoicism.

In Chapter Three, I focus on stories by servicemen published in the mainstream, professional press, known as service-author stories. They feature a self-deprecating kind of humour that, as Hobbes' and Scruton's work illuminates, involves authors laughing at previous versions of themselves in ways that create sympathetic self-portraits. These narratives, in addition, appeared in periodicals that served a national audience and contributed to the development of senses of national identity and, reflecting this context, the insouciant attitude adopted by their narrators perpetuates a stereotype according to which Britishness was associated with humour, stoicism, and resilience. The tales manifested notions that circulated before and during the conflict that British humour was particularly well developed, and a praiseworthy response to hardship, using humour to create the kind of laughing community that is described in the superiority theories above. Once again, the war is depicted via a style of humour that was popular in writing before the conflict and, in this case, pre-1914 perceptions of humour – the idea that humorousness was a national characteristic – also echoes into the wartime period. At the close of this chapter, I demonstrate the strength of the affirmative tone in the majority of humorous stories via contrast with texts by Saki and Lewis, whose war stories emphasise disquiet alongside humour.

Finally, Chapter Four addresses the role of humour in First World War theatre. Employing Freud's theory of humour, I argue that in a range of different plays humour circumvents the potential provocativeness of subjects that could be contentious or distressing, including issues of class, gender, grief and death. I demonstrate that when treated humorously, the emotional and political provocation these topics could create remains latent: the texts invite what Ngai calls 'minor' emotions rather than more extreme responses such as anger or despair. Largely, though not universally, humour facilitated the avoidance of what, in the Freudian model, is psychological censorship – repression – as well as the attention of official governmental censors, whose work was partly intended to prevent the public from being exposed to drama that might cause unrest. This capacity of humour to hold in balance amusement with discussion of potentially disquieting experiences and ideas grew out of well-established dramatic convention and suited the theatre, since this was a space that had to accommodate the sometimes competing demands of playwrights, audiences, censors, and theatre managers.

One hundred years after the 1918 Armistice, humorous representations of the First World War present opportunities to see the conflict's literature in different, unexpected, and intriguing new ways. Given the weight of academic and popular opinion that First World War writing is best understood in the context of 'horror', it may be the case that humorous Great War texts have the greatest potential to surprise and to provoke, prompting reconsideration of how writers described the conflict. Such provocation is at the heart of this thesis. By demonstrating the quantity, diversity, and nuance of humorous representations of the war, I trouble ingrained perceptions that Great War literature is not matter for amusement, and the assumption that humour in such writing is only a means of coping with suffering. Humour was central to a range of textual depictions of the Great War: ephemeral and more famous poetry, servicemen's own magazines, popular periodicals of the professional press, and theatrical performance. The various kinds of humour in poetry, trench newspapers, short stories, and plays helped to create impressions of the conflict ranging from depictions of the war zone as senseless and bizarre, to pictures of individuals becoming part of the military machine, to images of wartime military and national identity, to descriptions of the conflict interrupting domestic life on the home front. It was, moreover, existing traditions of humour that created such portrayals, with longstanding practices of humorous literature meeting the task of representing war experience. Styles of humour and types of humorous texts that had been popular before 1914 endured into accounts of conflict experience, most prominently: humorous absurdity often associated with nonsense literature; the machine-age comedy of music hall, comic periodicals, and parody; insouciant, stoical 'British' humour seen and discussed in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century press; the light, sometimes risqué, farcical, and satirical types of humour found in the theatre. By investigating the relationship between humour and representation in Great War literature, this thesis establishes a new way of thinking about the function of humour in First World War writing: humour did not only offer relief from anxiety or distress and help to boost morale, but contributed to striking, complex portrayals of war experience.

Chapter 1: Poetry

Humorous Absurdity in the War Zone

The outpouring of poetry that the First World War prompted was recognised, and mocked, even while the conflict was still taking place. The editors of the *Wipers Times* in 1916 bemoaned that they had been sent ‘a hurricane of poetry’, and asked that prospective contributors would instead ‘break into prose’.¹ Though the trench newspaper may not have been able to ‘live by “poems” alone’, the genre has since developed a unique prominence in perceptions and understandings of the war.² First World War poems have received more analysis, have been reproduced more frequently, and have a greater cultural standing than all other types of the conflict’s literature. Even in this most saturated field of study, however, such attention has not generally been extended to humorous poetry. Exploring humour can reveal some surprising facets of the genre, and this includes offering fresh perspectives on texts by famous poets, with familiar settings. In this chapter, I return to the well-trodden environment of the war zone, with a focus on some of the most emblematic tropes to emerge from the conflict’s literature – rats, death, and the trenches – bringing together a mixture of Great War poems in which the space of the front line is associated with humorous absurdity.³

My research uncovers new literary contexts for Great War poetry. The humorously absurd aspects of the texts I analyse have affinities with popular comic writing that was already well established, and such humour plays an important part in the depiction of the front and of servicemen’s responses to it. The poems I discuss share features – playfulness with logic and upside-down worlds – that appeared in a range of humorous texts before the conflict. These precedents most notably include nonsense writing, which was made famous by Lear and Lewis Carroll in the nineteenth century and popularised in periodicals of the same era. As a type of humour founded on inversions and on distortions of rationality, humorous absurdity is especially evocative of the odd, laughable qualities of life in the war zone. Soldier-speakers in the poems, furthermore, are presented as recognising the strangeness of the war zone and reacting, variously, with amused detachment, mischief, and playfulness. Such portrayals run contrary to common perceptions of Great War soldiers as heroes or victims, perceptions influenced by the solemn works that have become the conflict’s most famous poetry. Whereas existing analyses of First World War poetry tend to focus on gravity, irony, and suffering, I thus draw attention to other, lighter, humorous qualities that feature in the genre. I highlight the importance of humorous absurdity to the representation of the conflict in a variety of poetic works. Humorous absurdity helps to create

¹ ‘Notice’, *Wipers Times*, 20 March 1916, in *The Wipers Times: The Famous First World War Trench Newspaper*, ed. by Christopher Westhorp (London: Conway Publishing, 2013), p. 45. This foreshadows Lord Flashheart’s famous complaint in *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) – ‘the mud, the blood, the endless poetry’ – by seventy-three years: Richard Curtis, Ben Elton et al., *Blackadder: The Whole Damn Dynasty, 1485–1917* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 416.

² ‘Notice’, p. 45.

³ ‘War zone’ is defined here as the space closest to the fighting: the front line and the area behind it that is inhabited by servicemen and ruled by the military machine.

striking depictions of the war zone in poems that are disparate in style and tone, that were published in a range of contexts, and that were created by both celebrated and lesser-known or anonymous authors. I draw attention to darker elements in ‘minor’, predominantly light-hearted texts, and demonstrate the significance of humour in poetic works that are ostensibly solemn, illuminating the complexities of the poems in question. Humorous absurdity adds nuance to the picture of the First World War the poems present, complicating apparently grave texts and inviting amusement in response to subjects that may otherwise encourage, for example, pity, anger, or disquiet. By unearthing the echoes in Great War poetry of earlier humorously absurd writing, this chapter draws attention to humour’s role in creating arresting pictures of life in the war zone, suggests some uncomfortable connections between otherwise different texts, and shows that even familiar aspects of the conflict can be seen in a new light when discussed in the context of humour.

As well as indicating the reach of humour in the conflict’s poetry, showing that it sounds even in some well-known examples of the genre most associated with solemnity, my research adds to existing evidence that popular styles of writing established before 1914 remained relevant in representations of war experience. This kind of continuity has been most prominently highlighted, especially in relation to remembrance, by Winter, who moves away from the idea that the war involved radical cultural and artistic rupture.⁴ In literature, the approaches that have often been seen as appropriate to the depiction of the war are modernist writing and ironised versions of Georgian poetry, this irony being interpreted as suggesting the inadequacy of established aesthetics to modern industrial warfare.⁵ That the poems discussed here echo the absurdity found in pre-war humorous literature challenges the idea that the war could only be adequately represented in art that stresses disruption in its form. In relation to this, my work puts forward parallel contexts for absurdity in literary responses to the war to those which Vincent Sherry discusses. Sherry sees in English modernism reflections of the rhetorical distortions he suggests the Liberal government employed to justify engagement in a war that ‘by precedent and convention [...] they ought to have opposed’. He notes a humorous element in some of the contortions he discusses, identifying ‘seriocomedy’, ‘comic wobble[s]’ and ‘involuntary comedy’ in Liberal discourse about the war.⁶ The poems analysed here, as I have been suggesting, also show strands of absurdity, doing so, however, in ways that echo styles and techniques often found in nineteenth-century humorous writing, such as nonsense.⁷

⁴ He demonstrates that ‘vigorous mining of eighteenth and nineteenth century images and metaphors to accommodate expressions of mourning’, took place during and after the war. Winter, *Sites*, p. 5.

⁵ Kendall, ‘Introduction’, *Poetry*, p. xvii.

⁶ Sherry, pp. 21, 10–11.

⁷ Nineteenth-century nonsense literature is reflected in such modernist texts as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1939), and in Dadaism, Surrealism, and twentieth-century Absurdist literature. André Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, though published in 1940, in fact stemmed from an interest in black humour that began in the First World War. Sherry does not, though, investigate the relationship between his chosen modernist texts, nonsense literature, and the distortions of reason he identifies in Liberal justifications for the war. See: Michael Holquist, ‘What Is a Boojum? Nonsense and Modernism’, *Yale French Studies*, 96 (1999), 100–17 (p. 101); Michael Bennett, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), pp. 10, 12–13; Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester: Manchester

This pre-war writing informs my approach to humorous absurdity in First World War poetry. I define humorous absurdity as a kind of humour that arises from senselessness, oddity, illogicality, the bizarre, and the topsy-turvy – all of which are famously conspicuous in Lear’s and Carroll’s work. The two parts of this chapter focus on different manifestations of these qualities in Great War poetry. The first centres on *mundus inversus* (the world upside down).⁸ I draw attention to the many humorously anthropomorphised animals that appeared in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century humorous writing, tracing similarities between these and animal-human reversals found in Great War poems, with a focus on rats. The second part of this chapter also includes reversals, in this case between states of life and death. I am, in addition, concerned in this latter section with humorous absurdity that stems from a particular set of tensions. These are tensions between sense and senselessness, and between rationality and values such as common sense and compassion. At times, the poems see elements of fatalism emerge, which are accompanied by speakers who are depicted as adopting some degree of amused stoicism in response. This is absurdity as it appears in Camus’ *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* or *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which Camus famously uses Sisyphus’ predicament as a metaphor for what he saw as the pointlessness of ‘ridiculous’ human existence.⁹ However, this type of absurdity is less common in the war texts I discuss than is humorous absurdity as associated with light-heartedness and playfulness, with amusement and the fantastical. As I have been explaining, the closer context for the poems in this chapter is the humorous absurdity that featured in Lear’s and Carroll’s work especially and in the verse and prose of popular comic periodicals. Such absurdity has more to do with the definition that Michael Bennett favours: he argues that ‘ridicule’, the ‘preposterous’ and the ‘laughable’ are central to the literary absurd, his terms suggesting that absurdity involves a mixture of amusement and ludicrousness.¹⁰ Focusing on humorous absurdity thus means moving away from the vocabulary usually employed to describe Great War poetry – from familiar reference to irony, devastation, and pity – and drawing attention to other qualities less frequently linked to the genre. In relation to the more sober works included, I often also use the term ‘laughable’. This is in order to suggest a greater distance from mirth, and to describe aspects of poems in which humorous absurdity evokes impressions of bafflement or exasperation.

Incongruity theories of humour help to explain the ways in which comic absurdity is created, and the ways in which it invites amusement, offering more detail on how poets create depictions of the war zone as a topsy-turvy space, and how they generate impressions of playfulness and light-heartedness in response to this environment. In order to understand how the senselessness and oddities of humorous absurdity generate mirth, I employ Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s work in particular. Kant understands amusement as emerging from that which bewilders the reason: laughter for him ‘indirectly’ gives

UP, 2006), p. 74; Mark Polizzotti, ‘Introduction’, *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940), trans. by Mark Polizzotti (London: Telegram, 2009), pp. 9–16 (p. 11).

⁸ Cornwell, p. 42.

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 4, 115–17.

¹⁰ Bennett, p. 10.

pleasure to the mind; since the mind cannot make sense of the ludicrous, the enjoyment of laughter comes from a 'reciprocal effect' of the body 'on the mind'.¹¹ Schopenhauer, similarly, locates the pleasure of amusement in a momentary challenge to the reason (to our 'abstract' understanding).¹² For example, the theories suggest why it might be that, when we are presented with human-animal inversions in Great War literature, we are inclined to be amused by the reversals rather than disturbed by the dehumanisation they imply (or, at least, why our disquiet is tempered by amusement). The poems discussed here often do not seem to invite the kind of laugh out loud, physically-expressed mirth that Kant describes, instead encouraging such feelings as mild levity, or amusement mixed with discomfort.

The 'several thousand volumes of poetry and verse' that Reilly consulted when compiling her celebrated bibliography of Great War poetry indicate, as many researchers have noted, the impossibility of exhaustive analysis even of a specific aspect of the genre.¹³ My focus on humorous absurdity is related to the concentration in this chapter on poetic depictions of the front line – to my suggestion that humour appears even in portrayals of the setting most closely associated with horror. Front-line experience particularly gave rise to expressions of absurdity because for many this environment went far beyond, or was removed from, life as a civilian in pre-war Britain.¹⁴ Senses of the extraordinary may have been particularly strong for those who were new to the military, including the poets discussed here.¹⁵ I focus on a limited number of poems in which humorous absurdity appears in order to allow space for detailed literary analysis, the kind of close attention generally reserved in the past for solemn war poetry, but which is required for elucidating the poems' intricacies. My small sample is not meant to imply that humour, including humorous absurdity, is absent from other examples of the genre. On the contrary, other kinds of humour, such as satire, are used in Great War poetry to address topics including mud and lice, senior officers, the hierarchies of military rank, and women's wartime work. Humorous absurdity appears extensively, meanwhile, in the limericks and parodies of nursery rhymes that were printed in trench newspapers, which I have dealt with elsewhere.¹⁶ The poems selected present particularly clear and intriguing instances of how humorous absurdity contributes to the depiction of the conflict, as well as indicating the diversity of poetry in which humorous absurdity features. I reflect something of the genre's variety by including texts that all contain some element of humorous absurdity, but which are by authors ranging from those who are unknown and anonymous contributors to trench journals, to some

¹¹ Kant, p. 209.

¹² Schopenhauer, p. 98.

¹³ Reilly, *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography* (London: George Prior Publishers, 1978), p. xviii.

¹⁴ This is not to say that civilian life did not see immense change during the war or that it could not be extreme, especially for the working classes. The war zone, moreover, can be 'as much a product of experience as of geographical factors'. The war zone in the form of the front line in particular, though, is presented in the poems as a unique space. Intriguingly in relation to the subject of absurdity, moreover, Second World War writer Keith Douglas compared entering the war zone as 'walking through a looking-glass'. McLoughlin, *Authoring*, pp. 83–84.

¹⁵ Graves, Rosenberg, and Gurney were all volunteers, and de Stein enlisted in the Oxford Officer Training Corps before the war and went on active service in 1915. The authors of the trench-newspaper poems discussed were members of the 12th (Service) Battalion, Sherwood Foresters, which was formed as part of Kitchener's Army in 1914.

¹⁶ Emily Anderson, "'There Was a Young Girl of the Somme, | Who Sat on a Number Five Bomb": The Representation of Violence in First World War Trench Newspaper Nonsense Rhymes', *Literature & History*, 27 (2018), 129–47.

of the best-known writers of the conflict: Rosenberg, Graves, and Gurney. Martin Esslin explains that his term the ‘theatre of the absurd’ was ‘coined to describe certain features of certain plays in order to bring out certain underlying similarities’.¹⁷ My approach to humorous absurdity is similar, demonstrating how aspects of humorous nineteenth-century writing appear in a range of Great War poems, and casting light on the complexity and nuance that this creates in poets’ representations of the war zone.

1.1 Queer Sardonic Rats: Topsy-Turvy Life in the War Zone.

In the poems discussed in this section, the front line is depicted via humorous inversion: rats, often thought of as among the lowliest creatures, are portrayed in anthropomorphic form, and threaten the human-rodent hierarchy. These texts are: an anonymous work entitled ‘Rats’, a poem by an author named only as ‘C. L. P.’ called ‘The Wooing of Evangeline – In a Support Line Dug-Out’ (‘Evangeline’), and Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (‘Break of Day’). The former two texts appeared in the *B.E.F. Times* in December 1916 and November 1917 respectively, and the latter was composed in June 1916 and was first published in the December 1916 edition of *Poetry*.¹⁸ Rats have become one of the key symbols of the war, staples of how the environment of the Western Front in particular is thought of as being the horrendous, defining space of the conflict: part of the war myth is, in Todman’s words, that men lived ‘for four years, in the most appalling conditions, [...] in trenches scraped into the ground, surrounded by mud, rats and decaying corpses’.¹⁹ The rats that appear in my chosen texts to some extent reflect this perspective, evoking senses of dehumanisation: the rodents thrive, taking over soldiers’ food and equipment, and enjoying a greater degree of freedom than the humans with whom they share the front line. At the same time, though, as in Kant’s theory, ludicrousness – including human-like rats – is amusing because it defeats the understanding, and we are briefly able to take pleasure in the risibility of the war zone. Indeed, the rats have similar qualities to the creatures that appear in humorous literature published before the outbreak of hostilities, resembling the anthropomorphised rodents, some of which are also sardonic and superior, that feature in nineteenth- and early-twentieth century comic literature. The rats of the battlefield reflect the trend during this period, including the war years themselves, for comic anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Arising from this is a picture of servicemen as characterised by amused stoicism and wryness, qualities that counteract the impression of war-zone debasement that the human-rat inversion implies. These are servicemen who seem capable of taking momentary, Kantian enjoyment from that which does not make sense.

¹⁷ Martin Esslin, ‘Preface to the Pelican Edition’ (1967), in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) (London: Penguin, 1968), pp. 9–11 (p. 10).

¹⁸ B.E.F. stands for British Expeditionary Force. ‘Rats’, *B.E.F. Times*, 25 December 1916, in Westhorp, *Wipers Times*, p. 143; C. L. P., ‘The Wooing of Evangeline – In a Support Line Dug-Out’, *B.E.F. Times*, 1 November 1917, in Westhorp, *Wipers Times*, p. 241; Rosenberg, ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ (1916), in *Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. by Noakes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 106.

¹⁹ Todman, p. xii.

The rat who scuttles across the speaker's hand and No Man's Land in Rosenberg's poem, the most famous animal in the war's poetry, is discussed in the second part of this section, after consideration of some of this rodent's less celebrated relatives:

Rats

I want to write a poem, yet find I have no theme,
"Rats" are no subject for an elegy,
Yet they fill my waking moments, and when star-shells softly gleam,
'Tis the rats who spend the midnight hours with me.

On my table in the evening they will form "Battalion mass",
They will open tins of bully with their teeth,
And should a cake be sent me by some friend at home, alas!
They will extricate it from its cardboard sheath.

They are bloated, fat and cunning, and they're marvels as to size,
And their teeth can penetrate a sniping plate,
I could tell you tales unnumbered, but you'll think I'm telling lies,
Of one old, grey whiskered buck-rat and his mate.

Just to show you, on my table lay a tin of sardines – sealed –
With the implement to open hanging near,
The old buck-rat espied them, to his missis loudly squealed,
"Bring quickly that tin-opener, Stinky dear!"

She fondly trotted up the pole, and brought him his desire,
He proceeded then with all his might and main,
He opened up that tin, and then – 'tis here you'll dub me "Liar" –
He closed it down, and sealed it up again.

Have you seen one, should a rival chance to spoil his love affair,
Bring a bomb, Mills, hand, and place it underneath
The portion of the trench where that rival had his lair,
And then he'll pull the pin out with his teeth.

The Wooing of Evangeline

Aloud, at nights, he will philosophise;
And squeaks his senile counsel all the day;
Pedantic lover, old and grim and grey,
He mingles love with wisdom, when he tries
To win his maid with sage remarks and wise.
And though I often drive the pair away,
They still return, and then I hear him say,
With many coughs, and splutterings [sic], and sighs:

“The more I see of war, and all its woes,
The happier I do feel, Evangeline,
That you and I, dear heart, are not like those
Poor devils there, who have to fight, my Queen,
They have a rotten time, and Heaven knows,
We’re better off, us rats: –
SOME PORK AND BEAN?”

The comic anthropomorphism in the texts creates a picture of the war zone as being an odd, topsy-turvy environment, with some disquieting undertones. The rats perform military activity (‘On my table in the evening they will form “Battalion mass”’), are in control of the environment, including military objects in particular (they master ‘tins of bully’, ‘sniping plate[s]’, a ‘tin-opener’, a Mills grenade, and ‘Pork and Bean’ [tinned rations]), and have romances (‘He mingles love with wisdom, when he tries | To win his maid with sage remarks and wise’). In the second stanza of ‘Evangeline’, such behaviour gives rise to uneasy reflection on the fate of humans: ‘They have a rotten time, and Heaven knows, | We’re better off, us rats: – | SOME PORK AND BEAN?’ The final line in particular, as a way of rounding-off the lofty reflections of a highly superior animal, casts human suffering as a topic of polite dinner conversation for haughty rodents, the supremacy of rats in the war zone being made explicit here. Similarly, at the close of ‘Rats’, the description of the rodent pulling out the pin of a grenade leaves, with black comedy, the threat of destruction at the hands of the lordly creature hanging in the air. Simon Critchley points out that humorous human-animal inversions often stem from and encourage a ‘critical position’, which is especially notable in satire, and this applies to the rats in these *B.E.F. Times* poems.²⁰ The texts convey dissatisfaction with the conditions of the front line; they indicate the unsuitability of the war zone for humans, and hint at its degrading, dehumanising effects. Comic anthropomorphism

²⁰ He argues that ‘what makes us laugh is the reduction of the human to the animal or the elevation of the animal to the human’. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 29.

acted as a means of expressing criticism that was sufficiently oblique to avoid censorship, though a large amount of complaining was allowed in trench newspapers.²¹ To a degree, in fact, both poems tie-in with a kind of irony that Fussell identifies, that of the war being a ‘hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth’: part of the impression they create is of the conflict diminishing human status while that of rats is elevated.²²

Both poems, though, by juxtaposing a creature that is a symbol of the war zone’s awful conditions with human-like behaviour, domesticity, and romance, are coloured by playfulness and whimsy, removing them from the bleakness of such Fussellian irony. Kant’s take on the incongruity theory of humour helps to explain the way in which the comic anthropomorphism found in ‘Rats’ and ‘Evangeline’ solicits such amusement. As already noted, Kant suggests that ‘In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction)’.²³ For Kant, the ‘sudden shift of the mind, first to one and then to another point of view for considering its object’ corresponds to ‘a reciprocal tensing and relaxing of the elastic parts of our viscera, which communicates itself to our diaphragm (like that which ticklish people feel)’; such movement is ‘conducive to health, which [...] is the real cause of a gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing’.²⁴ The ‘sudden transformation’ of a ‘heightened expectation into nothing’ that Kant associates with the ludicrous gives ‘the Understanding’ momentary enjoyment.²⁵ To borrow this model, the two rat poems invite amusement by presenting the reader with incongruous images – rats behaving as if they are people – images that are absurd in Kant’s sense of resisting attempts at rational comprehension. It is from such impossibility of understanding that humour based on absurdity or incongruity gives rise to the momentary pleasure of amusement. Though the poems have a serious subject matter, highlighting terrible conditions, they create an amusingly absurd picture of war experience – rather than a wholly disturbing one – because the anthropomorphised rats are images that we can enjoy not making sense of.

As a point of comparison, the texts are far more light-hearted than E. J. L. Garstin’s ‘To the Rats’ (1916), which also deals with the subject of the rodents’ pervasiveness in the war zone, but which does so in much gloomier terms: it includes such lines as ‘Above the noise of Hun projectiles shrieking | The sound of scratching footfalls never cease’, and ‘stretched upon this bed, my body numb, | I see you, agile, helter-skelter fly’.²⁶ Both of the portrayals of rats from the *B.E.F. Times* are matters of creative leaps that involve amusement at front-line conditions. The behaviour and superiority of the rats is imaginatively incongruous, the objects of the war zone becoming props for inventing new feats of brilliance for the human-like rodents. The soldier-speakers, especially the serviceman in ‘Rats’, are cast

²¹ Fuller, p. 19.

²² Fussell, pp. 7–8.

²³ Kant, p. 209.

²⁴ Kant, p. 210.

²⁵ Kant, pp. 209–10.

²⁶ E. J. L. Garstin, ‘To the Rats’, in *Soldier Poets: Songs of the Fighting Men*, ed. by Galloway Kyle (London: Erskine Macdonald, 1916), p. 24.

as bemused observers of the animals who are the shrewder inhabitants of the front line, the flights of fancy in which these servicemen engage creating an outlook on their environment characterised by light-heartedness. The treatment of form in the poems is also mischievous and witty: the anonymous writer of 'Rats' claims the rodents are 'no subject for an elegy' before making them his topic nevertheless, while C. L. P.'s use of the sonnet to describe his rats' romance inverts a form popularly associated with exalted expressions of human love. His title is also a reference to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* (1847), the kind of literary allusion that contributors to trench newspapers often made.²⁷ Indeed, the rat poems convey an impression of servicemen approaching the war with an emotionally detached, buoyant stoicism, propagating a perception that soldierly identity involved maintaining a sense of humour – a perception that I discuss in more detail in the following chapters. The humour in these texts makes their portrayals of the front something other or more than complaints about conditions in poetic form. Humour metamorphoses the war zone so that it becomes a fanciful space populated by amusing creature-characters, a space that has its dark elements, but which is ludic nevertheless.

The poems are part of a trend in trench newspapers of using animals and objects to offer frequently satirical, skewed, and comical perspectives on experiences of the conflict.²⁸ To give just a few examples, texts were printed that were written from the point of view of a mule, a 'cuss-word', and a tin of bully beef.²⁹ The *Gambardier* featured a tale of two guns that fall in love, while cartoons depicting insects on sentry duty and horses on sick parade appeared in the *Buzzer* and the *Hades Herald* respectively.³⁰ This genre of works includes a 'Diary of a Rat' in the *Pennington Press* of 1916, which recounts such adventures as 'Discovered curious tent in 6 Coy. [Company] lines. Weird-looking men sleeping here. Had good look round. Turned out to be the editorial tent of the *Pennington Press*'. The rat accidentally eats 'the Editor's blue pencil', the colour used for censorship, commenting 'Silly fool shouldn't leave them lying about', a hint at the frustrations of censorship and the capacity of such things as humorous rodents, as in 'Rats' and 'Evangeline', to avoid it.³¹ Other humorous representations of rats in the trench press include the story 'The Bog Rats in Harts Spring' and a cartoon showing rats and frogs as servicemen's 'bedfellows'.³² Zoomorphism was equally popular, with contributors to trench journals

²⁷ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* (Boston: William D. Ticknor & Company, 1847).

²⁸ These resembled 'It narratives', popular in the nineteenth century. They were 'stories related by everyday things', including, published between 1844 and 1873, the tales of a feather, an umbrella, a London doll, a needle, a pin, a shilling, and a book. Elaine Freedgood, 'What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 15 (2010), 83–100 (pp. 83–84).

²⁹ All trench newspapers cited in this thesis are accessed from the database 'Trench Journals and Unit Magazines of the First World War', unless otherwise stated. See: <http://www.proquest.com/products-services/trench.html>.

Penypre, 'The Confessions of a Mule', *Joy Prong*, March 1916; Jujube, 'Memoirs of Moment: No.1 The War Story of A Cuss-Word', *Lines of Fire*, June 1918, p. 14; 'The Diary of a Tin of Bully Beef', *Salient*, December 1915.

³⁰ 'The Gloomy Side of War', *Gambardier*, March 1915; Cartoon, *Buzzer*, April 1916; Cartoon, *Hades Herald*, August 1916.

³¹ 'Rats! Being an Extract from the Diary of a Rat Discovered Recently under the Floor Boards of a Tent in 7 Coy. Lines', *Pennington Press*, 22 September 1916, p. 8.

³² 'The Bog Rats in Harts Spring', *HBOCB*, August 1917; Cartoon, 'War Makes Strange Bedfellows', *Dump*, December 1915.

frequently portraying servicemen as animals or as distant relations of humanity. Sappers, who did building and engineering work, are likened to moles, and ‘natural history’ articles appeared describing the ‘habits’ of various different kinds of servicemen.³³ Similar examples include ‘The Hut Dwellers’ in the *Hanger Herald* of April 1915, a text reporting the discovery that this ‘race’ were not the same as the rest of the inhabitants of the Central European Continent’, having ‘for some reason emigrated from [...] Jingoland’.³⁴ The mock-biblical ‘Tribe of Tommiz’ from the *Dump* of December 1915, meanwhile, describes ‘a strange and wonderful people, for they make unto themselves holes in the ground, even as the beasts of the field’.³⁵ These kinds of texts were often accompanied by illustrations of the ‘creatures’ in question (figure 1).

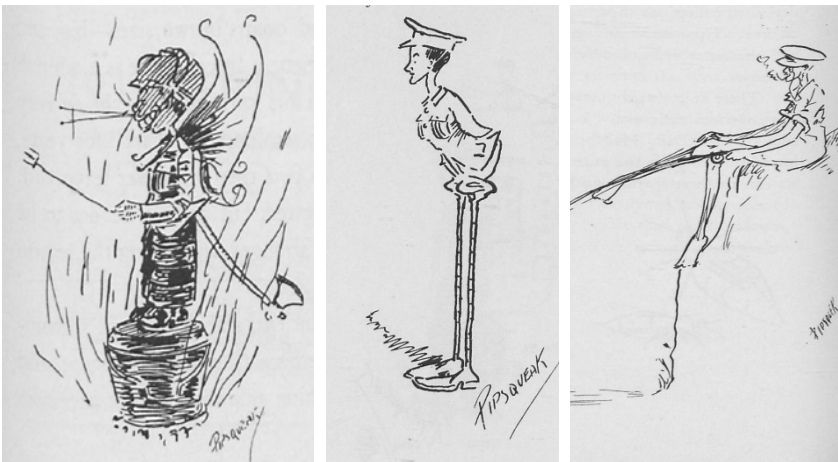


Figure 1: Pipsqueak, illustrations for ‘Natural History Notes’, *The Lead-Swinger*, 6 November 1915, 16–18.

These trench-newspaper texts, including the rat poems, participate in a wide-ranging and longstanding tradition of anthropomorphism and comic anthropomorphism, features of literature, cartoons, and caricatures that can be understood as creating humour from incongruity.³⁶ Schopenhauer in fact uses anthropomorphism as one illustration of his theory of humour. Giving the example of a man prompting amusement by placing his wig on his dog, Schopenhauer explains that ‘certain animal forms, such as apes, kangaroos, jumping-hares [...] sometimes appear ludicrous’ because ‘something in them resembling man causes us to subsume them under the concept of the human form, and, starting from this concept, we perceive their incongruity with it’.³⁷ Such comparisons between humans and animals flourished in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Comic anthropomorphism appears, for

³³ R. W. S., ‘The Sapper’, *Dump*, December 1918, p. 4; Beaconitis, ‘Natural History: The Garrison Gunner’, *Gambardier*, April 1915, p. 9; Compound, ‘Natural History Notes’, *Lead-Swinger*, 6 November 1915, pp. 16–18.

³⁴ The Hantiquarian, ‘The Hut Dwellers’, *Hanger Herald*, April 1915, p. 3.

³⁵ ‘The Tribe of Tommiz’, *Dump*, December 1915, p. 28.

³⁶ Roger Scruton, in contrast, contends that amusement can arise from perceptions of similarity. Using the example of a caricature of Margaret Thatcher, he writes ‘The caricature amuses, not because it does not fit Mrs Thatcher, but because it does fit her, all too well’. The ‘exaggeration is amusing because it draws attention to some feature of her’ (‘Laughter’ [1982], in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by Morreall [Albany: SUNY Press, 1987], pp. 156–71 [p. 161]).

³⁷ Schopenhauer, pp. 97–98.

instance, in some of the most well-known children's literature of the period. The most prominent examples are Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Lear's work.³⁸ To give just a few instances, Lear's Owl and Pussy-Cat famously go to sea in their 'beautiful pea-green boat', the former singing and playing guitar, and are married by an equally anthropomorphised 'Piggy-wig'.³⁹ His Duck and Kangaroo happily converse about the latter carrying the former out of the 'nasty pond', the duck bringing four pairs of socks, a cloak, and a cigar.⁴⁰ Lear's Daddy Long-Legs in 'The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly' is described as 'Dressed in brown and grey' and discusses with the Fly going to court and seeing 'rugs and jugs and candle-lights'.⁴¹ Lear's limericks also contain anthropomorphism, as with his 'Old Man of Whitehaven', for example, who 'dance[s] a quadrille with a Raven', and as seen in his illustrations that draw similarities between people and animals (for instance, 'There was an Old Man with an Owl' and 'There was an Old Man who said, "Hush!").⁴² Carroll's fiction, meanwhile, abounds with comic anthropomorphism, from the Cheshire Cat with his grin and its playfulness with logic, to the Mock Turtle and his description of his schooldays, to the White Rabbit who 'actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on'.⁴³ These kinds of animal-human inversions could be put to satirical purposes, cartoons featuring images of politicians blended with animals are good examples, as is Saki's *Westminster Alice*, a series of satires that made use of Carroll's novel to highlight the absurdities of the political world, collected in book form in 1902.⁴⁴

The fashion for anthropomorphism included the creation of human-like rats. The description of rodents taking over the environment in 'Rats' in particular is similar to that in Robert Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1842): the creatures 'ate the cheeses out of the vats', 'licked the soup from the cook's own ladles', and 'Split open kegs of salted sprats | Made nests inside men's Sunday hats'.⁴⁵ An 1890 piece in *Punch* reported a 'mass meeting of Rats' under the 'Reformer's Oak in Hyde Park', the object of which was to 'protest against the proposal made by a Correspondent of *The Times*' that the rats in the park should be removed. The senior rat presiding says that they would show by 'orderly behaviour' at their gathering that 'Rats knew how to conduct business [...] A barbarous suggestion had been made to evict them [...] Arbitration seemed to him the most polite course'.⁴⁶ A 1906 poem in the same publication told the story of 'The Rat and the Dormouse', in which a rat who owned 'a ducal

³⁸ Anthropomorphism, as today, was not only used for humour but was also common in children's literature in general. Celebrated examples are Beatrix Potter's stories (1902–130), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894).

³⁹ Edward Lear, 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat' (1871), in *Nonsense Books by Edward Lear* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1904), pp. 7–9.

⁴⁰ Lear, 'The Duck and the Kangaroo' (1871), in *Nonsense Books*, pp. 10–13.

⁴¹ Lear, 'The Daddy Long-Legs and the Fly' (1871), in *Nonsense Books*, pp. 14–17 (p. 14–15).

⁴² Lear, 'There was an Old Man of Whitehaven' (1846), in *Nonsense Books*, p. 66; Lear, 'There was an Old Man with an Owl' (1846), in *Nonsense Books*, p. 80; Lear, 'There was an Old Man who said, "Hush!"' (1846), in *Nonsense Books*, p. 58.

⁴³ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (London: Macmillan and Co., 1866), pp. 90, 142–43, 2.

⁴⁴ Saki, *The Westminster Alice* (London: The Westminster Gazette, 1902). For examples of cartoons, see: 'Suggestions for Aerial Navigation', *Punch*, 1 January 1871; 'The Cat That Killed the Rat', *Punch*, 26 June 1880, p. 295.

⁴⁵ Robert Browning, 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' (1842), in *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*, ed. by Daniel Karlin (London: Penguin, 1989), pp. 30–38.

⁴⁶ Horace Lester, 'Rats in Council', *Punch*, 27 September 1890, p. 153.

Mayfair mansion' had a dormouse as a guest. Thinking the mouse in need of 'education', the rat attempts to inspire him with London culture, but fails because the mouse prefers the simple pleasures of the country.⁴⁷ *Atalanta* in 1888, meanwhile, printed a poem in which rats are told to leave the speaker's home, accompanied by drawings of them packing up possessions and beginning their journey (figure 2).⁴⁸



Figure 2: 'A Letter to the Rats', *Atalanta*, 1 June 1888, p. 527.

The trend for anthropomorphism in the nineteenth century contributed to a wide cultural concern with human-animal relationships, a concern that was in part a response to advances in natural history, most famously Charles Darwin's work.⁴⁹ From Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Zoological Philosophy* (1809) to Robert Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) to Darwin's revolutionary theory of species, the nineteenth century witnessed a crucial shift in understandings of the human-animal boundary', with animals seeming to come closer to humans.⁵⁰ This shift was disturbing for some, representing a disquieting threat to humanity's superior, enlightened position by indicating base origins: 'It was popularly said that Darwin proposed that Victorian men and women, the presumed flowers of civilised society, were direct descendants of vile beasts'.⁵¹ The idea that we may be closer to the animal world than was previously realised also, however, provided opportunities for humour. In Eugene August's words, 'Right from the start', people sensed that 'there was something funny about the Darwinian revolution', with 'the established, orderly view of creation' being 'turned topsy-turvy'.⁵² Darwin himself was a common target for comic anthropomorphism, becoming 'one of the few scientists to have been portrayed in an extraordinary variety of printed cartoons'; his 'general hairiness could easily be turned into the animal fur of anthropoid apes'.⁵³

⁴⁷ Robert Palk, 'The Rat and the Dormouse', *Punch*, 7 February 1906, p. 98.

⁴⁸ 'A Letter to the Rats', *Atalanta*, 1 June 1888, p. 527.

⁴⁹ For discussions of this trend, see: Claire McKechnie and John Miller, 'Victorian Animals', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17 (2012), 436–41 (p. 437); Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay, 'Introduction', *Victorian Animal Dreams*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 1–12 (p. 2); Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 8.

⁵⁰ McKechnie and Miller, p. 437.

⁵¹ Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place, Volume II of a Biography* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 157.

⁵² Eugene August, 'Darwin's Comedy: The Autobiography as Comic Narrative', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 75 (1989), 15–19 (p. 15).

⁵³ Browne, 'Darwin in Caricature: A Study in the Popularisation and Dissemination of Evolution', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 145 (2001), pp.496–509 (pp. 498, 506).

It is the comic nature of nineteenth-century anthropomorphism, its background of concerns with dehumanisation, and its satirical element that is taken up in First World War writing, including the rat poems discussed. The way in which nineteenth-century examples of anthropomorphism invite amusement – in Schopenhauer’s framework, creating a sense of ludicrousness by emphasising incongruity – re-emerges in the wartime poems, and rats, abundant in the war zone, became the focus of the kind of comic anthropomorphism that had been applied to a range of animals in humorous writing preceding the war. Even at the detailed level of characterising rats as urbane, techniques of *mundus inversus* that were common in the nineteenth century in war poetry evoke senses of humorous oddness, the war zone becoming a recreation ground for the fancies of servicemen-speakers who are attuned to opportunities for playfulness. More than this, in fact, the Great War texts reflect the critical element found in their earlier counterparts; they are partly a matter of satire, of voicing complaints (and, in the circumstances of war, of doing so in a manner that could circumvent censorship). Previous comic anthropomorphism had lampooned politicians and modern science itself, and in the war this kind of ridicule is applied to the conditions of the front, making it clear that this is an environment in which rats thrive while humans suffer. Indeed, the human-animal reversals that feature in the poems suggest concerns with dehumanisation that are not dissimilar from those brought about by the Darwinian revolution. The war, that is, in these texts is presented as debasing humanity – debasing servicemen – via explorations of blurred boundaries between people and animals.

The rich tradition of *mundus inversus* to which the two trench-newspaper poems belong has echoes with the most famous ‘rat poem’ to emerge from the war: Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day’. Examples of comic anthropomorphism that appeared before the outbreak of the conflict may not have had a direct influence on Rosenberg’s writing, or on that of the *B.E.F. Times* poets. ‘Break of Day’, however, as with the two representations of war-zone rats already discussed, contains similar techniques, with similar effects, to these earlier works, contributing much to the nuance and complexity of what is now one of the most celebrated poems of the war:

Break of Day in the Trenches

The darkness crumbles away.
It is the same old Druid Time as ever.
Only a live thing leaps my hand,
A queer sardonic rat,
As I pull the parapet’s poppy
To stick behind my ear.
Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies.
Now you have touched this English hand

You will do the same to a German
Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
To cross the sleeping green between.
It seems, odd thing, you grin as you pass
Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes,
Less chanced than you for life,
Bonds to the whims of murder,
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
The torn fields of France.
What do you see in our eyes
At the shrieking iron and flame
Hurl'd through still heavens?
What quaver—what heart aghast?
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins
Drop, and are ever dropping,
But mine in my ear is safe—
Just a little white with the dust.⁵⁴

Unlike the two trench-newspaper texts, 'Break of Day' did not appear in a setting designed mainly for mirth, and its primary provocation is not comic pleasure, but Rosenberg's solemn disavowal of the circumstances of war is articulated alongside moments of incongruity of the kind that, in Kant's understanding, solicit amusement, complicating the poem's apparent gravity. This is one instance where the distinction between comedy and humour made in the introduction to this thesis is useful: the poem is not a comic text in the sense that it does not have a strong generic association with the provocation of mirth, and nor is it dominated by invitations to amusement. It does, however, have moments that, in Kantian terms, challenge the reason, and there is enjoyment to be found in this momentary defeat. Two of the most striking and slippery aspects of the poem, indeed – the rat, and also the treatment of the poppy – evoke absurdities that invite us to join the speaker in taking pleasure in that which is senseless: Rosenberg's employment of absurdity creates an intricate depiction of the speaker's outlook according to which anger is interlaced with playfulness and amused stoicism.⁵⁵ I thus argue that humorous absurdity imparts complexity to the poem – it contributes to what makes the text intriguing and equivocal – and that humorous absurdity is significant to the representation of the speaker's attitude, to the impression we are given of how he responds to his environment.

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, p. 106.

⁵⁵ For context, Rosenberg seems to have enlisted for financial reasons. He found army life 'soulless and tedious, but he prided himself on being a good soldier'. Noakes, 'Introduction', *Rosenberg*, pp. xiv–xv.

Several critics have discussed the poem in terms that relate to humour, though without fully recognising its importance in the text. Fussell points out the poem’s various ironic elements, such as ‘the irony in the transposition of human and animal roles that the trench scene has brought about’, the ironising of the traditions of ‘pastoral and of general elegy’, and the irony of the word ‘safe’ in the penultimate line.⁵⁶ Silkin makes a similar observation when he highlights that the rat, ‘a supposedly lesser creature’, can by crossing No Man’s Land do ‘what men dare not’. Silkin does in addition repeatedly refer to absurdity in his discussion of the poem. He writes that ‘war is a man-made irrational activity which brings with it absurd, irrational restrictions’; ‘Man absurdly incarcerates himself in the battlefield’; the rat ‘mocks the absurd plight’ of humans and “‘grins” at perceived absurdity’. This is a kind of absurdity that emphasises the horror of the battlefield on a grand scale – the focus is on the idea of humanity being brought low – and indeed absurdity for Silkin is framed within a discussion of the relationship between humanity and God. He argues that ‘God is noticeably absent’, the implication being that ‘since man can do no better than murder his own kind, he deserves no better witness to his suffering [...] than the rat (rat-God)’.⁵⁷ Silkin and Fussell thus both highlight the central rat-human reversal, doing so in terms that suggest its seriousness. Shifting analysis towards the humour of this inversion, though, draws out the subtleties of Rosenberg’s depiction, and casts light on the picture given of the relationship between the speaker and his environment.

In a letter to Laurence Binyon in autumn 1916, Rosenberg stated that he would ‘saturate’ himself with ‘the *strange* and *extraordinary* new conditions of this life and it will refine itself into poetry later on’ (my emphasis).⁵⁸ This process seems to have included the development of tropes – the poppy and the rat – that are presented with a sense of eccentricity and humour in ways that reflect their appearance in ‘Break of Day’. Noakes explains how Rosenberg ‘played with ideas over long periods, returning to themes, indeed to whole lines, that interested him’, and this was at work in the evolution of humorous absurdity in his most famous text. A ‘droll’ rat appears in an untitled poem composed between June 1914 and February 1915: ‘A rat whose droll shape would dart and flit | Was like a torch to light my wit’, but ‘when the rat would rape my cheese | He signed the end of his life’s lease’.⁵⁹ A text called ‘In the Trenches’, meanwhile, written in France around the same time as ‘Break of Day’ in June or early July 1916, mirrors the treatment of the poppy in the more renowned work:

I snatched two poppies
From the parapet’s edge,
Two bright red poppies

⁵⁶ Fussell, pp. 250–53.

⁵⁷ Silkin, *Out of Battle: Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972), p. 278. Silkin’s position is inspired by an association between God and rats in Rosenberg’s ‘God’, likely composed in 1915 (Rosenberg, ‘God’ [1915?], in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, pp. 97–98).

⁵⁸ Rosenberg, letter to Laurence Binyon, Autumn 1916, in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, pp. 320–21.

⁵⁹ Noakes, ‘Introduction’, *Rosenberg*, p. xxi; Rosenberg, ‘[A Flea Whose Body Shone like a Bead]’ (1914/15), in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, p. 80.

That winked on the ledge.
Behind my ear
I stuck one through,
One blood red poppy
I gave to you.

The sandbags narrowed
And screwed at our jest,
And tore the poppy
You had on your breast...
Down – a shell – O! Christ.
I am choked... safe... dust blind – I
See the trench floor poppies
Strewn. Smashed you lie.⁶⁰

Though this second text does not invite amusement, both works establish connections between humour and features – the rat and the poppy – that reappear in ‘Break of Day’. In the first poem there is an affiliation, based on humorousness, between a ‘droll’ rat and his speaker, as well as a sense of a power struggle between the two. This rat in particular has an element of fun, the dual response to the rodent – it inspires ‘wit’ and contributes to the adverse nature of the war zone by threatening the speaker’s food – resembles the ambivalent treatment of the rats in the trench-newspaper poems above. In the second, ‘In the Trenches’, a contrast emerges between the speaker’s playfulness with poppies (his ‘jest’) and the destructiveness of the war zone. In the final two lines of this poem, furthermore, there is an image that connects the flowers to servicemen’s maimed bodies, as in ‘Break of Day’, though the less well-known text closes with a bleak perspective on the poppy, whereas ‘Break of Day’ has a more whimsical final perspective on it, as is explored below.

The authorial and editorial alterations made in the manuscripts and typescripts of ‘Break of Day’ also speak to the importance of the poem’s humorous aspects: they indicate the significance of vocabulary in the text that relates to humour. In the handwritten version sent in a letter to Gordon Bottomley, who was to edit *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg* (1922), Rosenberg initially describes the ‘live thing’ in his speaker’s hand as a ‘queer uncanny rat’, crossing out ‘uncanny’ and replacing it with ‘sardonic’. In this version he has also only settled on using the adjective ‘droll’ after trying another descriptor first, which is crossed out and illegible.⁶¹ By the time the work is published in *Poetry*, the line ‘It seems, odd thing, you grin as you pass’ has been changed to ‘It seems you inwardly grin as you pass’,

⁶⁰ Rosenberg, ‘In the Trenches’ (1916), in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, p. 105.

⁶¹ Rosenberg, ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’, in letter to Gordon Bottomley, *First World War Poetry Digital Archive* <<http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8086>> [accessed 23 February 2016].

an alteration replicated in Bottomley's 1922 collection of Rosenberg's work, despite the former version having been used both in the handwritten manuscript and two typescripts.⁶² The line remains contested in modern scholarship: Stephen and Fussell copy the form used in *Poetry*, while Kendall, as well as Noakes in her very detailed collection of Rosenberg's work, maintain 'odd thing' and reject the 'inwardly grin[ning]' version of the rat.⁶³ That both the author and his editors show such alertness to terms that relate to humour – their carefulness with the words 'sardonic' and 'droll' and with the grinning rat – indicates the significance of that which is skewed and oblique about the poem, the importance to the text of that which is not 'straight'.

'Break of Day' conveys a sense of absurdity that is present in the form of a subtle, latent quality of oddness throughout. It is established by the opening account of the dawn. Rosenberg's representation of this moment has been noted for its ironic effect: the entrance of the rat spoils what is traditionally associated with hope and beauty. 'Break of Day' thus participates in the practice found elsewhere in war poetry, as Fussell notes, of authors ironically juxtaposing 'a sunrise or sunset with the unlovely details of the war'. Fussell comments that Rosenberg's poem 'undertakes its quiet meditative ironies at morning stand-to', or, as Nils Clausson suggests, the text could be categorised as being an 'ironic aubade'.⁶⁴ Yet before the rat's arrival Rosenberg describes dawn as 'the same old druid Time as ever', an extraordinary, eccentric image that the poet himself called 'vague' but 'the best way I could express the sense of dawn'.⁶⁵ Within this context, the rat is not only a marker of irony, but also corresponds to the sense of oddness created in the first two lines: it is a 'live *thing*' (my emphasis), and 'queer'. At the start of the poem, the moment of dawn is thus not only ironised, but also made weird.

This sense of oddness feeds into Rosenberg's use of anthropomorphism which, not dissimilarly from the anthropomorphism in the rat poems above, is central to the text's absurd quality. Rosenberg's rat involves the presentation of something at which, in Kant's words, 'the understanding' suddenly stops short – something 'in which it [the understanding] does not find what was expected' – the kind of confrontation that can lead to the mental and physical oscillation that provokes laughter.⁶⁶ The endowment of the rodent with human traits creates an ambiguous relationship between the rat and the speaker; it is partially humorous in Kant's sense and partially bitter and disquieting. In the initial section, the speaker affiliates himself with the rat, a perspective on his relationship to the rodent that, as with the

⁶² Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', *Poetry*, 9 (1916), 129; Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. by Gordon Bottomley (London: William Heinemann, 1922), pp. 89–90 (p. 89); Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in letter to Gordon Bottomley; Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', first typescript, *First World War Poetry Digital Archive* <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/1468>> [accessed 23 February 2016]; Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', letter to Edward Marsh, 4 August 1916, *First World War Poetry Digital Archive* <<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/1470>> [accessed 23 February 2016].

⁶³ Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in Stephen, p. 168; Fussell, p. 250; Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in Kendall, *Poetry*, pp. 137–38; Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, p. 106.

⁶⁴ 'Stand to' involved soldiers waiting and preparing for attacks at dawn and dusk, the times most likely for offensives to take place. Fussell, p. 55; Nils Clausson, "'Perpetuating the Language": Romantic Tradition, the Genre Function, and the Origins of the Trench Lyric', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30 (2006), 104–28 (pp. 122–23).

⁶⁵ Rosenberg, letter to Edward Marsh, 4 August 1916, in Noakes, *Rosenberg*, p. 308.

⁶⁶ Kant, p. 209.

anthropomorphism in 'Rats' and 'Evangeline', is an example of *mundus inversus*. Rosenberg's speaker notes that the rat has the greater freedom because not attached to a nation, the phrase 'if it be your pleasure' giving the animal a quality of aristocratic, leisurely superiority, but he nevertheless initially adopts a friendly attitude towards it. The idea in line seven that the rat would be shot if 'they knew' its 'cosmopolitan sympathies' involves an element of fanciful personification – no-one would actually shoot rats for that reason. The speaker seems to be amusing himself by applying, incongruously, an explanation for shooting rats that is based on human values – the wartime taboo against 'cosmopolitan sympathies' – to an animal. The discomfiting nature of the subject matter here may mean that this incongruity does not provoke physical laughter of the kind that Kant describes – this is one instance where the subjectivity of humour plays an important role – but the speaker's playfulness is Kantian in the sense that it involves embracing and enjoying, at least momentarily, that which does not make rational sense. The speaker emphasises the madness of the war zone by making the ludicrous suggestion that a rat could be treated as partisan in a human war, in doing so, it seems, hinting that humans' division of themselves into divided, enemy, violent camps is itself absurd.

The personification of the rat, inviting the mind to oscillate (as it does before we laugh) between animal and human, allows for affinities between the soldier and the creature. The choice of pronoun, 'They', in line seven makes this identification more specific; it puts the speaker and the rat in their own, separate category – 'they' would shoot you, he seems to say, but 'I' am not like them. The speaker sympathises with the rat's cosmopolitanism, an impulse that several critics have linked to Rosenberg's 'outsider' status.⁶⁷ In pairing his speaker with the rat Rosenberg creates a relationship that carries pathos, since there is something quite lonely about the duo and sad about the speaker's identification with it, but there is also a sense of mischief, of droll humorousness. Indeed, as Das and McLoughlin put it, Rosenberg's rodent not only turns 'the much-loathed trench-rat into the most urbane of war's literary animals', but also subverts 'the standard anti-Semitic trope'.⁶⁸ Such wryness in Rosenberg's representation of the rat, though, is followed by the use of the rodent to convey anger stemming from the speaker's awareness of his own degraded condition. This is behind the faintly mocking tone to the phrase 'if it be your pleasure': the poet gives the sense that he is sarcastically addressing, with slight bitterness, a superior who does not deserve such status. The rat's 'grin' as it passes 'Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes' is disquieting because it seems to be a reaction to the knowledge that the

⁶⁷ He was the son of Lithuanian immigrants, Jewish, and belonged to a Bantam battalion. Das, 'War Poetry and the Realm of the Senses', in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Kendall (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), pp. 73–99. (pp. 89, 96); Joseph Cohen, *Journey to the Trenches: The Life and Work of Isaac Rosenberg 1890–1918* (London: Robson Books, 1975), p. 16; Neil Corcoran, 'Isaac Rosenberg', in Das, *Poetry of the First World War*, pp. 105–16 (p. 107).

⁶⁸ Das and McLoughlin, 'Introduction', Das and McLoughlin, pp. 1–36 (p. 27). Jahan Ramazani similarly notes that 'Rosenberg appropriates the anti-Semitic trope of Jews as vermin'. That being said, there is more work to be done on tracing the origins and development of the rat as an anti-Semitic symbol. (Jahan Ramazani, "'Cosmopolitan Sympathies" Poetry of the First Global War', *Modernism/modernity*, 23 [2016], 855–74 [p. 178]). The rat's prominence in this context later in the twentieth century was foreshadowed by a longstanding use of dehumanising representation of Jewish people (Ziva Amishai-Maisels, 'Dehumanizing the "Other" in the Visual Arts', in *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism and Xenophobia*, ed. by Robert Wistrich [London: Routledge, 1999], pp. 44–72 [p. 54]).

humans, physically impressive creatures, are ‘Less chanced [...] for life’. It is a gloating grin and, though a further example of fanciful personification, seems not to be an expression with which the speaker can fully sympathise. The anthropomorphic sardonicism of the rat thus evolves into a source of distance between rodent and speaker.

The representation of poppies in the poem has a similar mixture of humorous absurdity and uneasiness. The image of ‘poppies whose roots are in man’s veins’ is one of the work’s most graphic and unsettling: it suggests a literal connection between the dead and the flowers that is a disquieting take on the poppy in its association with the battlefield.⁶⁹ However, this image is framed by the two other references to poppies that seem to mix wryness and whimsy: the poppy behind the speaker’s ear first seen at the start of the poem and returned to in the final two lines – ‘mine in my ear is safe – | Just a little white with the dust’. The initial picture of a soldier standing in a trench with a poppy behind his ear is playfully incongruous. The image could easily be described with the two adjectives Rosenberg uses to introduce the rat: ‘queer’ and ‘sardonic’. It is, to borrow the term he adopts to characterise the same action with the poppy in ‘In the Trenches’, a ‘jest’, contrasting the terrible seriousness of the destruction recounted in the centre of the poem.⁷⁰ Indeed, this declamatory central section is book-ended with the more light-hearted depiction of the poppy, the return to the soldier with the flower behind his ear at the end of the text possessing an intensified sense of affecting, amused humanity, since it follows the terrible detail about the circumstances in which the jest takes place. There is a similar equivocality at work to that associated with the rat: the image is one of pathos, particularly at the end of the text, but is also one of playfulness, inviting a slight sense of amusement.

Schopenhauer’s view of humour helps to elucidate how this moment encourages such enjoyment, and the impression of the speaker and his environment that it creates. Schopenhauer associates amusement with the triumph of a faculty (perception) that he sees as a faculty of the present – of freedom from regrets of the past and future fears. The ‘triumph of knowledge of perception over thought’ that ‘gives us pleasure’ in the form of amusement, as described in the introduction, is also the victory of the present, since perception is ‘the medium of the present, of enjoyment and cheerfulness’. (Perception contrasts ‘thinking’, or abstract thought, which is ‘the medium of the past, of the future, and of what is serious [...], the vehicle of our fears, our regrets’, and which is ‘often opposed to the satisfaction of our immediate desires’).⁷¹ Experiencing the ‘troublesome governess’ of reason being overturned, that is, is a freeing way to enjoy gratification in the present. This seems to be the attitude adopted by Rosenberg’s speaker – an attitude that readers are invited to emulate: he takes a little flash

⁶⁹ John Macrae’s poem ‘In Flanders Fields’ was first published in *Punch* in December 1915. Nicholas Saunders explains that the text ‘caused a sensation on its publication. The corn poppy was rechristened the Flanders Poppy [...]. The poem and the poppies that inspired it were fused into one, a symbol used to raise money for the war effort’. There was thus an association between the poppy and the battlefield at the time Rosenberg was writing. Nicholas Saunders, *The Poppy: A Cultural History from Ancient Egypt to Flanders Fields to Afghanistan* (London: Oneworld, 2013), p. 2.

⁷⁰ Corcoran argues that the ‘poet sticking the poppy behind his ear and then adverting to it again after everything his poem has confronted is playing the dandy, maintaining an elegant gesture and a pose’, which he describes as ‘cool in the idiomatic contemporary sense’ – a good characterisation of the poem’s close (p. 109).

⁷¹ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

of enjoyment in the immediate moment rather than worrying, via the faculty of abstract thought, or reason, about what his future in the war zone may hold. The image of the soldier with the poppy is striking because it seems to be a glimpse of playfulness that exists in the war zone only fleetingly.

As with the trench-newspaper poems, that is, 'Break of Day', especially in its closing lines, creates an impression of its speaker as stoical, wry, and amused, removing him from the victims of the war to which Rosenberg refers in the middle of his text. 'Rats' and 'Evangeline' give a picture of their soldier-speakers as amused observers, the *B.E.F. Times* poets articulating in their work amused, aloof outlooks. At the close of 'Break of Day', the speaker seems to turn away from the fates of the 'haughty athletes' who are 'Bonds to the whims of murder' as if they were not distressing, refusing to be disquieted and responding to the war zone instead, as has been seen, with the playfulness and whimsy of the poppy. The smallness of this rebellion against the war's destruction, which is emphasised by the minute focus of Rosenberg's description ('just a little white with the dust'), is a moment of overlap with the philosophical absurd: Camus' version of Sisyphus' tale is not 'epic' but rather a 'little narrative of everyday human resistance'.⁷² Rather than the evocativeness of 'Break of day' stemming only or primarily from its grand scale – from its representation of inhumanity – much of its interest lies in the outlook and personality of the soldier, in his sardonic contemplation of his identity, his playfulness, and in the sense that his small act of individuality counteracts the degradations of the war zone. 'Break of Day' thus presents what is, for such a celebrated Great War poem, a surprising impression of a soldier serving on the Western Front. Aware of the war's destructiveness and sensitive to its capacity to shatter human life, the speaker still displays drollness and eccentricity.

The absurdity in the poem thus not only contributes to the representation of the war zone as a space dominated by irrationality, but also suggests that having a sense of humour is an important element of war experience, especially as a response to the conflict's horrors. This reading gains credence in light of the many theories of humour in which emotional detachment – the ability to 'rise above' distressing situations, as Rosenberg's speaker does – is understood to be a key aspect of humour's function, of what humour gives us. This notion appears in accounts of humour from James Sully to Charles Baudelaire, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Freud and Luigi Pirandello.⁷³ Especially pertinent expressions of the idea are found in Kierkegaard's work, as well as that of First World War poet F. W. Harvey. According to Kierkegaard, the humourist 'has an essential conception of the suffering that he is in', but 'revok[es] the suffering in the form of jest' – this is 'why one both weeps and laughs when he speaks'.⁷⁴ Similarly, Harvey argues in *Comrades in Captivity* (1920) that humour comes from 'a certain abstraction from

⁷² David Carroll, 'Rethinking the Absurd: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. by Edward Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 53–66 (p. 64).

⁷³ James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter: its forms, its causes, its development and its value* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902), pp. 301–06, 314, 319–20; Charles Baudelaire, 'Of the Essence of Laughter' (1855), in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, ed. by P. E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), p. 148; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (1901/06), trans. by A. M. Ludovici (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909), p. 74; Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 229–30; Luigi Pirandello, 'On Humor', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 10 (1966), 46–59 (p. 48).

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 375.

worldly affairs which is not far off contempt for them' and that it is a 'laughing impulse of the soul' that 'saves men from committing suicide by preventing them from ever despairing' – much like Camus' 'scorn'.⁷⁵ For Harvey humour is founded on 'faith, hope, and charity,' merits he dubbed the 'cardinal virtues of Christianity'.⁷⁶ Camus in his theory of the absurd rejected what he saw as Kierkegaard's and other existentialists' use of such ideas to escape the circumstance and sorrow of humanity, to find illusions of salvation.⁷⁷ Yet Kierkegaard's and Harvey's perspectives on humour do have some echo in the attitudes to the absurd found in Camus' work, as well as in the whimsy of Rosenberg's 'Break of Day'. With such theories as Kierkegaard's and Camus' in mind, the poem's disturbing aspects thus fade further into the background, shifting the emphasis surrounding the feelings dealt with in the text. We can place more stress on the speaker's light-heartedness than his anger, the poem becoming less about suffering and more about how it can be overcome, if only for the brief moment in which the joke takes place.

In both 'Break of Day' and the trench-newspaper rat poems, humour helps to create intricacy in representations of the war zone and war experience. The vocabulary used to discuss First World War poetry has often concentrated attention on such things as irony, horror, satire, and solemnity but, as my analysis suggests, humour can be important as well. Each of the poems discussed show the war zone as a space that degrades, but this is not presented simply as cause for despair. The technique of comic anthropomorphism, which saw a surge in popularity in the nineteenth century, appears in Great War poetry as a means of capturing the eccentricities of life in the war zone. The rat poems suggest the capacity of an established, popular style of humour not only to invite mirth but also to create striking, provocative depictions of war experience. Reading Rosenberg's work in the context of the other two, lighter, rat poems helps to foreground its equivocality, the way in which its anger and dark irony is mixed with, on a smaller scale, whimsy, playfulness, incongruity, and wryness. Manifestations of Kantian incongruity in the poems invite readers to take momentary pleasure in that which escapes rational understanding; this presents the war zone as a space that is strange and bewildering, and that might be responded to with amusement. In Rosenberg's work, as with 'Rats' and 'Evangeline', a picture emerges from this of a serviceman who meets the war with some degree of amused stoicism – a different image of the soldier-poet from that which has often dominated popular understandings of the war. Indeed, in light of the notion, which runs through a range of theories of humour, that humour helps us to rise above distress, we can foreground the importance of amusement in the poems as a reaction to war.

⁷⁵ F. W. Harvey, *Comrades in Captivity: A Record of Life in Seven German Prison Camps* (1920) (Coleford: Douglas McLean Publishing, 2010), p. 259.

⁷⁶ Harvey, *Comrades*, p. 259.

⁷⁷ David Carroll, p. 58.

1.2 ‘Half-way down the road | To Lethe’: The Absurd Proximity of Death.⁷⁸

The poems discussed below are, again, a collection of works by better- and lesser-known authors, and range from the comic to the predominantly solemn. These, too, involve *mundus inversus*. In this case the reversal at hand is between states of life and death: in each of the poems life and death in the war zone are represented as existing in close proximity, at times even seeming to be interchangeable. More specific to these poems, in addition, are challenges to reason that emerge from instances of playfulness with logic. This echoes the techniques of nineteenth-century comic writing, especially nonsense literature, similarly to the comic anthropomorphism that features in the rat poems.⁷⁹ Again, recognising the role of humour in Great War poetry reveals continuity and durability: it indicates the robustness of forms of humorous representation established before the outbreak of war. In war poetry, again as in Kant’s model of humour, challenges to the reason create a sense of absurdity by forcing the mind to attempt to rationalise that which does not make sense. Such absurdity suggests the impossibility of understanding death in the war zone in a rational way, an impression that ranges in the poems below from being light and comic, evident invitations to mirthfulness, to being laughable rather than funny as such. As the equivocality surrounding comic pleasure in Kant’s theory helps to illuminate, several of the poems offer an ambiguous mixture of enjoyment and unease. The greater humorousness of the first two poems, de Stein’s ballad ‘Joseph Arthur Brown’ (‘Joseph’) (1916–18) and Graves’ ‘Escape’ (1916), is explained by the fact that they both, in different ways, involve triumphs over death: as noted in the introduction to this thesis, death is an unusual subject for humour in Great War literature.⁸⁰ The final poem included, Gurney’s ballad ‘The Target’ (1917), is more solemn, and the speaker ‘avoids’ death only in the sense that he kills instead of being killed.⁸¹

De Stein’s ‘Joseph’ appeared in his collection *Poets in Picardy* (1919), the contents of which he stated were ‘all jotted down in France during 1916, 1917, and 1918, either in the trenches, in billets, or in the more dignified purlieu of staff offices’.⁸² The humorous ‘Joseph’ is akin to many of the other poems in this volume, which were originally printed in such publications as the *Times*, *Bystander*, and *Punch*.⁸³ It also continues in the vein of comic ballads that had seen a boom in the nineteenth century, being reminiscent in particular of the military subject, dark humour, and vernacular language of Rudyard Kipling’s *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892).⁸⁴ Kipling’s poems include, for example, ‘Cells’, in which the

⁷⁸ Graves, ‘Escape’, in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), pp. 63–64 (p. 63).

⁷⁹ There is not as strong a precedent in pre-war comic literature of states of life and death being reversed as there is of human-animal inversions, *mundus inversus* seemingly being updated for a front-line context in which death was proximate.

⁸⁰ De Stein, ‘Joseph Arthur Brown’, in *The Poets in Picardy and Other Poems* (London: John Murray, 1919), pp. 74–76; Graves, ‘Escape’.

⁸¹ Gurney, ‘The Target’, in *War’s Embers* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1919), p. 50.

⁸² De Stein, ‘Preface’, in *Poets*, p. 11.

⁸³ Gardner, ed., *Up the Line to Death*, p. 182. See, for example: De Stein, ‘Sick’, *Punch*, 2 May 1917, p. 291; De Stein, ‘Fragment of a Tragedy’, *Punch*, 8 August 1917, p. 94; De Stein, ‘The Stew’, *Punch*, 7 November 1917, p. 316; De Stein, ‘Sidni the Storeman’, *Punch*, 26 December 1917, p. 426; De Stein, ‘Chloe’, *Punch*, 22 May 1918, p. 333.

⁸⁴ Jacky Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 155; Kipling, *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (London: Methuen, 1892).

speaker describes how he is ‘here in the Clink for a thundering drink and blacking the Corporal’s eye’, having been arrested for ‘resisting the guard’:

With a second-hand overcoat under my head,
And a beautiful view of the yard,
Yes, it’s pack-drill for me and a fortnight’s C.B.
For “drunk and resisting the Guard!”
Mad drunk and resisting the Guard –
’Strewth, but I socked it them hard!
So it’s pack-drill for me and a fortnight’s C.B.
For “drunk and resisting the Guard”.⁸⁵

Other especially prominent instances of the Victorian comic ballad are W. S. Gilbert’s *Bab Ballads*, which were initially published in *Fun* before being collected in 1869 and 1873, and which included poems with a military theme, such as ‘General John’.⁸⁶ This is the tale of the eponymous character, a ‘soldier tried’, with a ‘haughty stride and a withering pride’, and of Private James, a ‘man of mournful mind’ with ‘No characteristic trait [...] Of any distinctive kind’. The latter develops a theory that the two of them were ‘cruelly changed at birth’, and the final stanza sees them exchange places: they fall in to parade, ‘And Private James, by change of names, | Was Major-General John’. As with both of these poems, de Stein’s ballad features a cheeky, lower-rank hero who is acutely aware of, and willing to challenge, the authority that belongs to military seniority: we see in ‘Joseph’ a continuation of the comic trope of disgruntled lower ranks – the poem shows us that this is one aspect of military experience that the new kind of mechanised mass warfare did not change.

Not dissimilarly from the topsy-turvy role reversal in Gilbert’s poem, furthermore, de Stein’s humour conveys a sense of military power and hierarchy as ludicrous contingencies. The central joke in de Stein’s text emerges specifically from what is presented as a comically absurd situation: a living soldier being reported as, and treated as though he is, dead, with senior officers refusing to depart from official bureaucracy.

⁸⁵ Kipling, ‘Cells’, in *Barrack-Room Ballads*, pp. 20–22.

⁸⁶ W. S. Gilbert, ‘General John’, in *The “Bab” Ballads: Much Sound and Little Sense* (1869) (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1902), pp. 27–30.

Joseph Arthur Brown

The name of Joseph Arthur Brown
By some profound mischance
Was sent right through to G.H.Q.
As “Killed in action, France”.

So when poor Joseph went to draw
His bully beef and bread,
“You’re not upon the strength, my son”,
The Quartermaster said.

To Sergeant Baird then Joseph went
And told his fortune harsh,
But Sergeant Baird on Joseph glared
And pulled his great moustache.

“Have I not taught you discipline
For three long years?” said he,
“If you are down as dead, young Brown,
Why, dead you’ll have to be”.

In vain the journal of his town
Was brought by friends to please,
That he might see his eulogy
In local Journalese;

For to the Captain Joseph went
With teardrops in his eye,
And said, “I know I’m dead, but oh!

I am so young to die!”
And at the Captain’s feet he knelt
And clasped him by the knee.
But on his face no sign of grace
Poor Joseph Brown could see.

“Then to *John Bull* I’ll write”, he cried,
“Since supplication fails”.
“But you are dead”, the Captain said,
“And dead men tell no tales”.

So reckless passion seized upon
The luckless Private Brown,
And with two blows upon the nose
He knocked the Captain down.

’Mid cries of horror and surprise
They led the lad away.
Before the Colonel grim and stern
They brought him up next day.

But when the Colonel sentenced Brown
(R.62703)
With thund’rous voice and language choice
To thirty days F.P. [field punishment],

Across the trembling prisoner’s face
A smile was seen to spread,
As he replied, with conscious pride,
“You can’t, ’cos I am dead”.

De Stein hints at the importance of humorous absurdity to his war poetry in the preface to *Poets in Picardy*. He claimed that ‘any merit’ in his writing was due to ‘the influence of that wonderful spirit of light-heartedness, that *perpetual sense of the ridiculous* which, even under the most appalling

conditions, never seemed to desert the men with whom I was privileged to serve' (my emphasis).⁸⁷ De Stein's perspective on 'the ridiculous' gives an impression of servicemen who are constantly open to that which is potentially amusing in the war zone, who see it through the lens of humorous oddity. Having a 'perpetual sense of the ridiculous' is an outlook that could be used to describe the point of view on the war zone expressed in the rat poems above, with Rosenberg and the trench-newspaper poets each drawing out and exaggerating, for humorous effect, the rodents' perceived supremacy. De Stein's comments also articulate a soldierly, stoical, humorousness that, as explained in relation to the rat poems, comes into focus in light of philosophies – from Kierkegaard's to Harvey's and Camus' – according to which humour is a means of rising above, or becoming emotionally detached from, circumstances of suffering. Importantly in relation to 'Joseph', furthermore, 'the ridiculous' is more specific than 'the amusing' or 'the humorous', relating more to nonsensicality or senselessness, and to absurdity. It is these kinds of qualities that infuse the portrayal of death in the poem.

The kind of tension that Michael Holquist associates with absurdity helps to explain the humour in this poem. Holquist argues that the 'absurd points to a discrepancy between purely human values and purely logical values'. As an example he imagines a machine that suggests a cure for brain tumours would be to decapitate patients.⁸⁸ Holquist's definition of absurdity is made as a distinction from nonsense, which he sees not as a contrast between logic and human values, but as a contrast between different kinds of logic. This can be a useful theoretical delineation, but the line between nonsense and absurdity is not always clear. What Holquist views as absurdity appears in texts such as limericks that would normally be labelled as nonsense. Many limericks that were published in trench newspapers, for instance, as well as examples from Lear, the most well-known poet of the genre, involve contrasts between 'human' and 'logical' values. These appear in Lear, for instance, in his limericks about the 'Old Man with a gong' and the 'Old Person of Buda':

There was an Old Man with a gong,
Who bumped at it all the day long;
But they called out, "Oh, law! you're a horrid old bore!"
So they smashed that Old Man with a gong.

There was an Old Person of Buda,
Whose conduct grew ruder and ruder,

⁸⁷ De Stein, 'Preface', p. 11.

⁸⁸ Holquist, p. 106.

Till at last with a hammer they silenced his clamour
By smashing that Person of Buda.

In trench newspapers, for instance, we find:

A budding young second A.M.
Came to No.8 Squadron protem [sic].
He looked, just for fun,
Down a new Lewis gun;
And now he's transferred to – ahem!

There was a young girl of the Somme
Who sat on a number five bomb,
She thought 'twas a dud 'un,
But it went off sudden –
Her exit she made with aplomb!

Each of these rhymes involves a combination of unreasonableness and logic similar to that which Holquist associates with absurdity. They contain some narrative logic in the sense that the 'A.M.' is shot because he looks down the barrel of a Lewis gun; the Old Man and the Old Person are 'smashed' because, respectively, they are a 'bore' and 'rude'; and the 'girl of the Somme' is blown up because she sits on a bomb.⁸⁹ At a 'human' level, though, at the level of emotion or common sense, the fates of the characters in these poems are senseless.

Joseph's situation is articulated via just the kind of paradox that Holquist identifies in the absurd. The characters to whom he appeals behave in a way that is logical based on the premise that Joseph is dead and that the rules of administration must be followed, yet their attitude evidently disregards the 'human values' of ordinary good judgement and fellow-feeling. De Stein represents the war machine, satirically, as following its own kind of logic without regard to the rules of common sense. Part of the

⁸⁹ 'A Tragedy in One Spasm', *Numbrate*, 30 October 1915, p. 2; 'There was a young girl of the Somme', *Somme-Times*, 31 July 1916, in *The Wipers Times: The Famous First World War Trench Newspaper*, ed. by Christopher Westthorp (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 116; Lear, 'There was an Old Man with a gong' (1846), in *Nonsense Books*, p. 27; Lear, 'There was an Old Person of Buda' (1846), in *Nonsense Books*, p. 32.

poem's humour comes from the impossibility of fighting against this kind of war-zone logic using more conventional reasoning. Joseph's attempts to prove himself alive by sensible appeal to his superiors fail, as do the audience's efforts to rationalise his plight. To return to Kant's model, Joseph's situation invites readers to laugh by presenting them with a situation that challenges reason – our minds attempt to make sense of the paradoxical position he finds himself in, 'oscillating' as we struggle to find a rational explanation.⁹⁰ When we find that Joseph's circumstances escape the understanding of reason, such oscillation moves towards the body, encouraging laughter. Or, to borrow Esslin's description of the Theatre of the Absurd, the humour in de Stein's poem expresses 'the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought'.⁹¹ The culmination of the text's humour, the poem's 'punch line' – "'You can't, 'cos I am dead'" – is in fact also the key illustration that war-zone (il)logic is not open to reason. This is the moment at which, in Kant's terms, the tale comes to 'nothing': while reading, we may have developed a 'strained expectation' – an expectation that Joseph's circumstances will be explained, that they will emerge in a way that the 'mind' can understand – and the close of the poem dismisses this build-up of tension.

The comic ending in the form of Joseph's victory over the military machine's bizarre logic results from his adoption of war-zone absurdity to further his own ends: it is only by accepting the false premise on which his problem is based that he is able to counter it. In this respect he belongs to a group of characters that appear in other war texts associated with absurdity, characters whom McLoughlin identifies as '*gelotopoi* or laughter-maker[s]'. Laughter-makers include Jaroslav Hašek's eponymous hero in *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921–23) and Joseph Heller's Yossarian in *Catch-22* (1961), who 'neutralise the pervading hyperlogic by matching or exceeding it'. 'Hyperlogic' is the term McLoughlin uses to characterise the 'war machine', which she defines, as noted in the general introduction, as the 'military system of rules and regulations' that is 'seemingly independent of human creation and antithetical to human needs, literal-minded'.⁹² McLoughlin conceives of hyperlogic as being dissociated from mirth, whereas de Stein's poem does invite amusement but, similarly to McLoughlin's laughter-makers, Joseph is not 'crushed' by the ridiculousness of his war experience, instead 'embod[ying]' it and 'prosper[ing]' by it.⁹³ As with the rat poems, we are left with a picture of soldierly resilience. That is, the text is positioned against the war machine – against army bureaucracy – and, as is explored below, points obliquely towards Joseph's potential sacrifice of life, but it does not leave an impression of bleakness, or give a view of the war as a whole as being senseless. To return to de Stein's own reflections on his poetry, there is an emphasis on servicemen accepting rather than questioning their circumstances. After drawing attention to soldiers' humorousness, he adds that this quality 'seemed to flourish more freely in the mud and rain of the front-line trenches than in the comparative comfort of billets or "cushy

⁹⁰ Kant, p. 210.

⁹¹ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 24.

⁹² McLoughlin, *Authoring*, pp. 178, 182.

⁹³ McLoughlin, *Authoring*, p. 179.

jobs””.⁹⁴ He thus privileges responses to hardship – ‘light-heartedness’ and a ‘sense of the ridiculous’ – that suggest stoicism and acceptance that the war zone was not always best met with an expectation of reasonableness.

The comically absurd workings of the military machine in the poem are manifested in rhetorical tensions between the logical and the unreasonable, tensions that resemble those found in nonsense literature. The poem includes constructions that imply rationality (‘If/then’, ‘But/and’) to justify that which defies common sense: ‘If you are down as dead, young Brown, | Why, dead you’ll have to be’; “‘But you are dead,” the Captain said, | “And dead men tell no tales””. The joke at the close of the poem includes Joseph himself learning this rhetorical trick: ‘You can’t, ’cos I am dead’ (my emphasis). One context for these constructions is the kind of contortions of political rhetoric surrounding the war that Sherry discusses in relation to modernist writing.⁹⁵ However, the emphasis in ‘Joseph’ on humour and light-heartedness, as well as its popular style, mean that the poem is better elucidated with reference to the traditions of nonsense literature and its playfulness with logic. Carroll, for example, as Marnie Parsons explains, ‘writes logically’ in a way that ‘illustrates potential for senselessness within seemingly rigid constructions of meaning, without denying the presence of, or scorning the possibility of, sense’, while nonsense more broadly might be thought of as playing with logic in that it involves, as Holquist says, ‘contrasting one system of order against another system of order, each of which is logical in itself, but which cannot find a place in the other’.⁹⁶ Alice’s conversations in Carroll’s work are key examples of such playfulness with logic, such as her discussion with the Cheshire Cat:

“[...] I don’t want to go among mad people”, Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that”, said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad”.

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be”, said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here”.⁹⁷

Carroll’s work was, moreover, a rich source for the creation of satire both during and before the conflict, paralleling the satirical element of the irrationality that features in de Stein’s poem. Such satirical parodies include Saki’s *Westminster Alice*, already mentioned, in which Alice’s reasonable questioning contrasts the incompetence of political figures. *Punch* also printed *Alice* parodies for the purposes of satire, for example ‘Alice in Aylwinland’ (1899), ‘Alice in Bumbleland’ (1899), and ‘Alice in Blunderland’ (1880).⁹⁸ Contributors to trench newspapers produced similar stories and sketches, with

⁹⁴ De Stein, ‘Preface’, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Sherry, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Marnie Parsons, *Touch Monkeys: Nonsense Strategies for Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), p. 29; Holquist, p. 104.

⁹⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice*, p. 90.

⁹⁸ St. John Hankin, ‘Alice in Aylwinland’, *Punch*, 22 February 1899, p. 94; S. C. Swain, ‘Alice in Bumbleland’, *Punch*, 8 March 1899; Gilbert A’Beckett, ‘Alice in Blunderland’, *Punch*, 30 October 1880, p. 198.

titles such as ‘Alice amongst the Gunners’ (1916). De Stein’s playfulness with logic is thus part of a strand of texts in which the humorous absurdity of nonsense literature surfaces in representations of the war.⁹⁹ A kind of humour current in comic literature of the pre-war period endured into the literary culture of the conflict, in the case of ‘Joseph’ contributing to a satirical take on the workings of the military.

As already touched upon, ‘Joseph’ in addition involves *mundus inversus*, the topsy-turviness in this case revolving around disruption to the separation between the states of life and death. There is a similarity here between de Stein’s poem and other war texts that centre on absurdity and on satire as well. Joseph’s problem foreshadows that of Doc Daneeka in *Catch-22*, who is also declared officially dead and is excluded from military society as a result, as well as sharing a theme with Bertolt Brecht’s work of grotesque literature ‘Legende vom toten Soldaten’ (‘Legend of the Dead Soldier’) (1917/18).¹⁰⁰ In Brecht’s poem, a deceased serviceman is disinterred and sent back to the fighting, having, in another instance of clashes between reason and unreason, done ‘the logical thing | And died a hero’s death’.¹⁰¹ As in ‘Joseph’, these examples highlight a lack of common sense; we are encouraged towards a Kantian experience of the laughable when we try to find a rational way of understanding war. Each also, including ‘Joseph’, suggests the closeness of life and death in the war zone. Joseph’s circumstances seem to speak to a sense of individual servicemen being constantly on the verge of death and living side by side with death. The boundary between the living and the dead in the poem seems to have become so negligible that their positions can be inverted.¹⁰² In the image of Joseph being labelled a dead man while he is still alive there is even, perhaps, a comment on the potential self-sacrifice to which servicemen subjected themselves, a hint that even at the point of enlistment their life belonged to the war effort.

The slenderness of the boundary between life and death in the war zone is also Graves’ subject in ‘Escape’. Severely injured but still alive after attacking High Wood on the Somme in July 1916, Graves was mistakenly reported as having been killed. Contradictory reports meant his family and friends were unsure whether he was dead or alive, confusion that Graves rectified with an advert in the *Times* once sufficiently recovered.¹⁰³ He treats the episode with some degree of humour in his memoir

⁹⁹ For example: Salopian, ‘Alice amongst the Gunners’, *March Past*, 2 September 1916, pp. 15–19; The Member for Sark, ‘Alice in Wonderland Or, The Three Rules of Aiming’, *Periscope*, April 1917, p. 29; F. S. B., ‘Alice in Membrand’, *Ye Gas Shell*, October 1917, pp. 27–28.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961) (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 392; Bertolt Brecht, ‘Legende vom toten Soldaten’ (1917/18), in *Bertolt Brechts Hauspostille* (Berlin: Propyläen-Verlag, 1927), pp. 125–30.

¹⁰¹ Translated from the German: ‘Da zog der Soldat seine Konsequenz | Und starb den Heldentod’. Brecht, p. 125.

¹⁰² This idea also arises in Barrie’s partially comic play *A Well-Remembered Voice* (1918), discussed in Chapter Four, in which the ghost of a serviceman describes how, at the front, ‘the veil’ becomes thin: ‘if I were to go back [...] the living chaps would just nod to me’. Barrie, *A Well-Remembered Voice*, in *Echoes of the War* (1918) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), pp. 143–88 (p. 166).

¹⁰³ ‘Court Circular’, *The Times*, 5 August 1916, p. 9.

Good-bye to All That (1929), but his more immediate poetic reaction, 'Escape', was even more amused.¹⁰⁴

Escape

(August 6, 1916 – Officer previously reported died of wounds, now reported wounded: Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers).

...BUT I *was* dead, an hour or more.
I woke when I'd already passed the door
That Cerberus guards, and half-way down the road
To Lethe, as an old Greek signpost showed.
Above me, on my stretcher swinging by,
I saw new stars in the subterrene sky:
A Cross, a Rose in bloom, a Cage with bars,
And a barbed Arrow feathered in fine stars.
I felt the vapours of forgetfulness
Float in my nostrils. Oh, may Heaven bless
Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake,
And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.
After me roared and clattered angry hosts
Of demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts.
"Life! life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead!
Damned if I'll die for any one!" I said....

Cerberus stands and grins above me now,
Wearing three heads—lion, and lynx, and sow.
"Quick, a revolver! But my Webley's gone,
Stolen!... No bombs ... no knife.... The crowd swarms on,
Bellows, hurls stones.... Not even a honeyed sop...
Nothing.... Good Cerberus!... Good dog!... but stop!
Stay!... A great luminous thought ... I do believe

¹⁰⁴ Graves, *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 273–82.

There's still some morphia that I bought on leave".
 Then swiftly Cerberus' wide mouths I cram
 With army biscuit smeared with ration jam;
 And sleep lurks in the luscious plum and apple.
 He crunches, swallows, stiffens, seems to grapple
 With the all-powerful poppy ... then a snore,
 A crash; the beast blocks up the corridor
 With monstrous hairy carcass, red and dun—
 Too late! for I've sped through.

O Life! O Sun!

Scholars of Graves' work have long-recognised a humorous element in his war poetry, including 'Escape', but have interpreted it as a coping mechanism, a failure of realism and seriousness, or camouflage for psychological trauma. Dennis Welland, for example, argues that Graves' war poems capture soldiers' ability to find 'consolatory amusement' in the trivial, demonstrating that a 'sense of humour' could keep fear at a distance.¹⁰⁵ Michael Kirkham draws attention to Graves' adoption of 'an austere, mocking, ironic, off-hand manner', noting that his 'natural reaction' was to 'make a joke' of the war, an attitude Kirkham criticises as avoiding war's 'serious themes' and which he compares negatively with Owen's oeuvre, commenting that Graves has no work comparable to Owen's – no poems that are 'attempts by a shocking use of realism to dispel the "noble" image of war'.¹⁰⁶ Martin Seymour-Smith meanwhile suggests that 'Escape' is 'superficial', that its 'light, almost facetious tone disguises deep dreads and anxieties, as well as a fast-developing "neurasthenia"', and George Parfitt contends that Graves' fanciful tale-telling is a means of coping with 'or of evading the "duty to run mad"'.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to this, I suggest that the text's humour is a means of rendering a sense of life and death in the war zone as being, in a disorientating way, so close as to be interchangeable, and that humour also adds to a picture of Graves himself as a comic hero or laughter-maker.

Graves' opening line '...But I *was* dead' introduces a sense of absurdity immediately: just as Joseph should not be able to walk and talk (and punch) if he is dead, so it should not be possible for Graves to speak of his own death in the past tense. To borrow the Kantian model, the start of the poem presents readers with something absurd, that 'deceive[s] for a moment', escaping 'the understanding'. The opening is so arresting, that is – immediately alerting readers to a sense of oddity – because it confronts the reason with something that is unexpected, with something over which it has to pause and

¹⁰⁵ Dennis Welland, 'Elegies to This Generation' from *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (1960), in *Poetry of the First World War*, ed. by Hibberd (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), pp. 135–52 (p. 142).

¹⁰⁶ Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), pp. 9, 14–15.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Bloomsbury, 1982), p. 49; George Parfitt, *English Poetry of the First World War: Contexts and Themes* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 139–40. The 'duty to run mad' appears in Graves' 'Recalling War'.

undertake the mental gymnastics of switching ‘first to one and then to another point of view’ in attempts to make sense of what it observes.¹⁰⁸ The rest of the poem’s comical take on classical myth represents a skewed, mischievous response to the opening statement that reflects its absurdity. Drawing on the permeability of the classical underworld, Graves’ use of Hades as a setting highlights the topsy-turvy nature of the circumstances he relates.¹⁰⁹ The classical trope of journeying into the underworld is mixed with references to objects of the Great War, again creating humorous, Kantian incongruity. Graves mentions his ‘revolver’, his ‘Webley’s’, his ‘bombs’, and his ‘knife’, as well as ‘morphia’, ‘army biscuit’, ‘ration jam’, ‘plum and apple’, and the poppy. Elizabeth Vandiver even speculates whether the ‘old Greek signpost’, could be a reference to the commonplace names soldiers enjoyed giving trenches.¹¹⁰ These objects also contribute to the depiction of Graves’ persona in the poem as a kind of courageous underdog, facing up to the classical powers of death when his only weapons seem hopelessly inadequate, and when even several of these remain unavailable to him. This characterisation emerges especially in the mismatch between Cerberus and Graves with his jam and weak placatory phrases, and in the slightly slapstick image of Graves being pursued by angry ghosts. His use of heroic couplets is also wittily irreverent, corresponding with a satirical tradition of using the form to depart, sardonically, from weighty classical epics.

Indeed, within the poem Graves creates a version of himself who is, a little like de Stein’s protagonist, a hero of the comic absurd, or a laughter-maker. This stems from the way that he triumphs over the absurd closeness of death in the war zone. Graves is frantic in his fight for life, blessing Proserpine, retreating ‘Breathlessly’ whilst being pursued, crying out against his position, displaying fear when he meets Cerberus, and celebrating when he wins through. The sense of gaiety in ‘Escape’ is attached to the joy of survival, as seen in the exclamations that close both stanzas: “‘Life! life! I can’t be dead! I won’t be dead! | Damned if I’ll die for any one!’”, ‘I’ve sped through. | O Life! O Sun!’ In this respect Graves has something in common with Sisyphus himself:

when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. [...] Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Kant, p. 210.

¹⁰⁹ For example, in classical myth, Odysseus, Aeneas, Herakles, Theseus, and Sisyphus all descended to the underworld and then returned.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), p. 317.

¹¹¹ Camus, p. 116.

Having bargained to escape the underworld for a limited time, Sisyphus overstays his extra period on earth because so enamoured with life and Graves, similarly, fights to return to the living world – if only to face the absurd ‘penalty’ of a war zone in which he may only ‘accomplish’ further scrapes with death. Similarly to Joseph, moreover, Graves shows an ability to work within the eccentricities of his situation. The Graves who awakens in Hades matches his behaviour to the absurdity with which the conflict has presented him. The war has placed him in a situation where, bizarrely, he is apparently in the underworld, and so, equally bizarrely, he battles through using morphia and jam. This Graves, in his willingness to work with absurdity, diverges from the dry, official identity of ‘Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers’, who belongs to a more rational world, a world of official military reports and *Times* corrections. Equally, the act of writing the poem itself involves Graves as an author looking back at his ‘death’ with an aloof, amused perspective, in this sense having an element of his poetic persona’s gallant fancy. The war involves the ridiculous experience of being dead and coming back to life, and the poet meets this by creating a preposterously amusing image of the event and of himself, choosing to explain the extraordinary incident by insisting that it had involved a real, non-metaphorical, death and re-birth. Certainly, Graves seems to have enjoyed presenting this picture of his experience, returning to the tale to give it different elaborations. Another iteration of the story, with some alterations and additions, appears in a letter he wrote to Edward Marsh in August 1916. He insists to Marsh ‘I *did* die on my way down to the Field Ambulance’, before telling him that he put on his gas helmet to ‘keep off the fumes of forgetfulness’, asked that a ‘court-martial of British officers’ rather than Rhadamanthus judge him, held a ‘revolver to Charon’s head’ and got in the boat to go home, giving Charon a ‘note for 50 cm [centimes]’ that he ‘didn’t want particularly’.¹¹²

Graves’ letter to Marsh also highlights the contrast between his lively, triumphant, absurd understanding of his experience with more solemn accounts of death elsewhere in Great War poetry. Graves tells Marsh that while in the underworld he ‘chucked a Mills bomb’, which ‘scattered the millions of the mouthless dead in about two seconds’, a knowing, humorously irreverent reference to the first line of the celebrated, untitled sonnet by Charles Hamilton Sorley published in 1916. Graves here points towards a contrast between his own upbeat treatment of a life-in-death experience and Sorley’s devastatingly sober one. For Graves, life is reclaimed from death, but Sorley dismisses any such prospect, rejecting even the comfort of seeing the dead revived in dreams or in the imagination. ‘When you see millions of the mouthless dead | Across your dreams in pale battalions go’, he writes, or believe that ‘you’ have ‘Perceive[d] one face that you loved heretofore’, there is nothing to be said or done in response to these ghosts: ‘Say only this, “They are dead”’.¹¹³ Graves’ narratives in his letter and poem quite overtly make the claim that there is a lot more to be said, at least after his own death, and

¹¹² Graves, letter to Edward Marsh, 7 August 1916, in *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 58–59 (p. 59).

¹¹³ Charles Hamilton Sorley, ‘[When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead]’ (c.1915), in *Marlborough and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1916), p. 69.

the fancifulness of what he does say is a counter-narrative to Sorley's shattering realism and the version of the truth about death in war that it presents. Unlike Sorley, for whom death is a devastatingly final end that is not funny in the slightest, Graves' overcoming of death is a chance for him to represent the war zone as a space of ridiculous, humorous inversion and reversal. For Graves, the truth of the war zone is that, in Schopenhauer's terms, it 'convict[s]' the faculty of reason of 'inadequacy', a circumstance that makes him embrace fantastic absurdity, in sharp contrast with the starkness of Sorley's insistence on objective, rational fact.¹¹⁴ Indeed, elsewhere in his letter to Marsh, when describing himself winking at a doctor, Graves says 'this part of the tale is true, truer even than the rest', a comment that clarifies for Marsh's benefit the facts of the situation – presumably Graves did really wink – but that also recognises the potential for there to be different kinds of truth in war experience. Parfitt perceptively argues that in Graves' war writing there is a 'consistent effort at distance and detachment, a coolness and a wearing of masks', that Graves became a 'fabulator' in order to tell 'the truth', and this is at work in 'Escape'.¹¹⁵ War experience seems so bizarre that it is best captured via writing in which lines between fact and fiction are blurred, this kind of absurdity, once embraced, offering the potential for amusement and even joy.

Graves' gallant, comic persona contrasts the speaker in Gurney's 'The Target', whose perspective on the seeming interchangeability of the living and the dead is far more solemn. Gurney was wounded by a bullet in spring 1917, sustained injuries from gas in September of the same year and, suffering from poor mental health, was discharged in October 1918.¹¹⁶ 'The Target' was written in 1917 while Gurney was a patient in Bangor War Hospital.¹¹⁷ As with Rosenberg's 'Break of Day', Gurney's poem is predominantly solemn, but also revolves around irony and irrationality, including acute moments that challenge the reason, encouraging the mind to switch back and forth as it tries to make sense of that which it cannot grasp, similarly to the absurdities in 'Joseph'. These moments are more ambiguous than is the absurdity in de Stein's work, reflecting the equivocality over the pleasures of having reason defeated that appear in Kant's theory, and making the poem an intricate representation of the speaker's situation and outlook. Humorous absurdity contributes to the depiction of the war zone as a space of contradiction, reversal, and irrationality, it presents attempts to find a logical way of responding to the war as laughable, and even registers an impression of psychological trauma.

¹¹⁴ Schopenhauer, p. 98.

¹¹⁵ Parfitt, pp. 139–40.

¹¹⁶ Michael Hurd, 'Gurney, Ivor Bertie (1890–1937)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-37497?rskey=uJJct6&result=1>> [accessed 17 July 2017].

¹¹⁷ Gurney, 'The Target', *First World War Poetry Digital Archive*, <<http://www1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/9365>> [accessed 27 July 2017].

The Target

I shot him, and it had to be
One of us! 'Twas him or me.
“Couldn’t be helped,” and none can blame
Me, for you would do the same.

My mother, she can’t sleep for fear
Of what might be a-happening here
To me. Perhaps it might be best
To die, and set her fears at rest.

For worst is worst, and worry’s done.
Perhaps he was the only son...
Yet God keeps still, and does not say
A word of guidance any way.

Well, if they get me, first I’ll find
That boy, and tell him all my mind,
And see who felt the bullet worst,
And ask his pardon, if I durst.

All’s a tangle. Here’s my job.
A man might rave, or shout, or sob;
And God He takes no sort of heed.
This is a bloody mess indeed.

The poem imitates Thomas Hardy’s meditation on the irony of conflict in ‘The Man He Killed’ (1902), as Kendall points out, with Gurney’s poem offering a heightened sense of absurdity with regard to the relationship between life and death.¹¹⁸ Hardy’s speaker, with a confusion that Gurney replicates, insists ‘I shot him dead because – | Because he was my foe’, whilst also sympathising with his victim: the speaker struggles to see the dead man as his enemy, imagining that they may both have enlisted on a whim, and that they may be friends in a different context.¹¹⁹ In Gurney’s text there is a stronger impression of the boundary between the living and the dead being eroded. Hardy’s imagined interactions

¹¹⁸ Kendall, ‘Gurney’, p. 151.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, ‘The Man He Killed’, *Harper’s Weekly*, 8 November 1902, p. 1649. Subsequently published in *Time’s Laughingstocks and Other Verses* (London: Macmillan, 1909), p. 186.

between the speaker and his victim take place in a scenario outside of war and in which both are alive: he opens his poem by showing them together in an ‘ancient inn’ far away from death and the war, whereas Gurney’s opening stanza emphasises the interchangeability of those who are alive and those who are dead. Gurney’s speaker envisages meeting his victim only after he has himself been killed. In Hardy’s poem the emphasis is explicitly on the irony of conflict, the speaker reflecting how ‘quaint and curious war is’, since ‘You shoot a fellow down’, who ‘You’d treat if met where any bar is, | Or help to half-a-crown’.¹²⁰ Irony is also prominent in Gurney’s text, but this poem in addition centres on absurdity, on the logical impasse to which killing a potential friend gives rise and on the strange interchangeability of the living and dead. Kendall judges the poem to be an ‘unsuccessful’, ‘wobbly rewriting’ of Hardy’s text, but in fact it echoes the attitude towards ‘Fritz’ and the war in general that Kendall identifies elsewhere in Gurney’s poetry and correspondence: ‘Attempts by a brotherly enemy to kill him, and his own barely explicable duty to kill a brotherly enemy, constitute the most absurd comedy’.¹²¹

The absurdity in the poem contributes to conveying the predicament of Gurney’s speaker and to the pathos of his characterisation. There is some affinity with the logic used to justify Joseph being treated as a dead man in de Stein’s poem, the phrases the speaker uses to reassure himself and to explain away the ‘tangle’ of war appearing, if only from the reader’s point of view rather than that of the speaker himself, to be ludicrously inadequate: ‘‘Twas him or me’, ‘worst is worst, and worry’s done’, and ‘‘Couldn’t be helped’’. These have a clichéd note; the use of inverted commas in the latter quotation in particular emphasises its borrowed quality. As with the poem’s ironic and satirical title, there is a comment here on euphemism appearing in the language used to discuss war-zone killing, a sense of discrepancy between the action carried out and the phrases used to justify it. The difficulty of finding a convincing, proportionate response to killing is also behind the suggestion that ‘A man might rave, or shout, or sob’. The final stanza confirms that the war is a ‘tangle’ and a ‘mess’, neither God nor the speaker’s placatory phrases seem to have satisfied his need for justification, and the recourse could be expressions of frustration that may not be verbal (‘shout’, ‘sob’), and/or that are verbal but incoherent, even seeming to verge on madness (‘rave’).¹²² As explored below, ‘The Target’ in part echoes Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (1836), which had appeared as part of a series under the title ‘Madhouse Cells’ in 1842, in this case a non-humorous poem resounding in the wartime text. While Gurney’s servicemen is very far from being ‘mad’ in the same sense as Browning’s psychopathically cold killer, the echoes of ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ that appear in ‘The Target’ do add a resonance of psychological disturbance, of distorted reason and a potential to ‘rave’. Again, there is a hint that attempts to be rational in the war zone appear laughable. The protagonist in ‘The Target’ inhabits an environment in which

¹²⁰ Hardy, p. 186.

¹²¹ Kendall, ‘Gurney’, p. 151.

¹²² A particularly poignant reference given the mental health problems from which Gurney suffered. Hurd, ‘Gurney, Ivor Bertie’.

sources of stability – the comfort of faith, language that supports reasoning – are corrupted or unavailable.

The poem's most acute moment of absurdity emerges from a distortion of reason similar to that found in 'Joseph' especially, the war zone appearing as a space that makes a mockery of attempts to respond to it with logic:

My mother, she can't sleep for fear
Of what might be a-happening here
To me. Perhaps it might be best
To die, and set her fears at rest.

As in de Stein's poem, there is a tension between sense and senselessness. It is true that the anxieties of the speaker's mother about her son's safety would no longer be a problem if he died, but this involves a complete disregard for common sense or what Holquist calls 'human values'.¹²³ The speaker ignores the grief that his mother would experience in the event of his death and, in toying with the idea of abandoning the will to survive, refers to dying as something he could simply choose to do the way he might make more mundane decisions. The idea is unintentionally laughable on the part of the speaker and, potentially, it is darkly humorous for readers too; it adds to the representation of the speaker's confusion as both pathetic and risible. The moment might be explained via the equivocality in Kant's work over how it feels to have one's reason defeated: he proposes that the experience of meeting something absurd is 'certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding', but that absurdity is, nevertheless, 'indirectly enjoyable' for a moment via the action of the body – it is the body's oscillation that reflects onto the mind and creates the pleasure of amusement.¹²⁴ The suggestion about dying from Gurney's speaker may not generate physical laughter – it could easily be interpreted as grave or tragic – but it may equally provoke a kind of muted enjoyment, only partially overcoming the reason's dislike of that which it cannot make sense. Such ambiguous, dark humour resembles the kind of laughter that McLoughlin discusses, via Kant's theory, as emerging in representations of war across a range of periods. She posits that 'although laughter in and about conflict is often associated with humour, this is not always the case': the 'defeat of reason and the triumph of the body' that occurs in Kant's model produces laughter that is 'mirthless and nihilistic', and hence appropriate to representing the war zone's senselessness.¹²⁵

The suggestion made by Gurney's speaker is one instance in which the subjective nature of humour comes to the fore but, whether or not individual readers find the comment amusing, techniques similar to those used to invite humour contribute to the picture of war experience created. This not only

¹²³ Holquist, p. 106.

¹²⁴ Kant, 209.

¹²⁵ McLoughlin, *Authoring*, pp. 168, 187.

includes a sense of the war zone as a place where the rules of rational understanding do not apply, as explained above, but also an impression of Gurney's speaker being forced into a moment-by-moment existence, an existence focused in the present. Though the poem sees the speaker contemplating a man he has killed (in the past) and imaginatively constructing how he might relate to this man in the future, his suggestion about getting killed suddenly introduces a sense of his powerlessness over his past actions and his future. Schopenhauer indicates, as already noted, that ludicrousness is enjoyable fleetingly, a form of gratification arising from being momentarily free from the worries of the rational mind. That our perception (the faculty of the present) is temporarily able to discard the logical implications of the speaker's idea conveys a sense that, in the war zone, such an idea may be more appropriate than a rational plan for the future.

Indeed, since one of the few actions the speaker can take freely to influence his future is 'to die', he is in an intense version of the situation in which Camus suggests all of humanity exists: one way to take control of his fate would be to become the man who is killed.¹²⁶ What seems to be a bizarre suggestion becomes less so in the extreme environment of the war zone, a space in which dying really might seem to be a reasonable choice: if the speaker feels doomed to die or that his role is to die, then there is little need to prolong his mother's fears of him doing so. Camus also suggests that we can adopt a scornful attitude to the ludicrousness of existence, though, similarly to the ways in which laughter-makers react to absurdity.¹²⁷ Although Gurney's speaker is not a laughter-maker in the same way as are Joseph or Graves' personas – he could not be described as thriving in the war zone – his suggestion of overcoming his mother's fears by realising them does to an extent reflect the attitude of laughter-makers. It is a suggestion based on overcoming absurdity by embracing it, similarly to the acceptance of absurdity that the speakers in de Stein's and Graves' poems adopt.

The sense of the war zone as an absurd space also registers in the references to God's absence. The speaker's observations that 'God keeps still, and does not say | A word of guidance any way' and that 'God He takes no sort of heed' create a sense of disconnection from God, a suggestion that God's presence disappears in the circumstance of killing. As already touched upon, the lines resemble some of those in 'Porphyria's Lover': the speaker has murdered his lover with her own hair, and states in the final couplet that '[...] all night long we have not stirred, | And yet God has not said a word!'¹²⁸ The godlessness posited in Gurney's work, though, is not, as in Browning's text, a chilling reflection on the speaker's character – and nor is it solely a matter of highlighting the ironies and hypocrisies surrounding the relationship between war and the Christian church, as in some other Great War poems, though this kind of criticism is present.¹²⁹ In 'The Target', God's powerlessness seems to be a feature of the absurd

¹²⁶ Camus, pp. 1-5.

¹²⁷ Camus, pp. 1-5, 117.

¹²⁸ Browning, 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836), in Karlin, pp. 17–18 (p. 18).

¹²⁹ For example: J. C. Squire, 'The Dilemma', in *The Survival of the Fittest* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1916), p. 57; Charles Strachey [?], 'A Revised Version. To the Editor of *The New Witness*' (1915), in Stephen, pp. 251–52; 'The Christian Soldier', *Mudhook*, 1 May 1918; Siegfried Sassoon, 'They' (1917), in Kendall, *Poetry*, p. 94.

environment described; this is a world in which common religious points of reference do not offer satisfactory explanation or justification for the killing the speaker has perpetrated. 'The Target' partially creates the impression that McLoughlin identifies with absurdity in war literature – it gives a sense that the war machine, rather than God, rules the war zone – since it is the demands of the military machine that are satisfied by the killing that Gurney describes, killing which involves the treatment of humans as targets.¹³⁰ Gurney's views on Christianity, though, do not suggest that he saw God as entirely absent from the war zone. Although he declared that he 'hate[d] all formal ceremonies and Churches' and, reflecting on his war experience, asked 'How shall formal religion console me?', he also identified Wordsworth as his 'master in all these things' (presumably a reference to Pantheism), and suggested that 'People who find their Faith [sic] shocked by this war, do not need a stronger faith only, but a different one, without blinkers'.¹³¹ In light of this, the poem's references to God suggest that the war zone is an environment sufficiently removed from the conventional and the familiar that it may require, as Gurney puts it, faith 'without blinkers': the realisation that formal religion, like rationality, is one more source of understanding that seems nonsensical in the war zone.

As with Graves' and de Stein's poems, the war zone in 'The Target' is depicted as a world that defies rationality, challenging the reason with incongruities that cause it to stop short, potentially provoking amusement and emphasising the war zone's absurdity in doing so. Each of the poems' protagonists is shown, to different degrees and effects, reflecting this topsy-turviness: both Graves' persona and Joseph are laughter-makers, embracing the absurdity of their situations in ways that help them to triumph. The experience of Gurney's speaker is not affirmative in this sense, though the logic of his suggestion about choosing to die has something of the laughter-maker's approach to conflict about it. Gurney's poem is more equivocal than the comic 'Joseph' and the humorous 'Escape': as Kant's theory indicates, the experience of having reason defeated may not be unambiguously pleasurable. All of the texts considered, though, show similarities to the humour found in nonsense literature, with de Stein's work also indicating the influence of popular comic ballads. Although Gurney's and Graves' poems especially are in large part dissimilar from the literary nonsense that appeared, for example, in comic periodicals, novels, and poetry from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the absurdities they evoke are based on comparable features: twists of logic, a sense of the ridiculous in trying to understand that which is not reasonable, and *mundus inversus*. By definition to do with that which does not make rational sense, humorous absurdity conveys powerful impressions of the war zone as an environment that defies and distorts attempts to comprehend it with reason. This established form of humour feeds into the nuances of de Stein's, Graves', and Gurney's poetic responses to the conflict, contributing to portrayals of the war zone as a topsy-turvy, disorientating, laughable world.

¹³⁰ McLoughlin, *Authoring*, p. 168.

¹³¹ Qtd. in Pamela Blevins, *Ivor Gurney and Marion Scott: Song of Pain and Beauty* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 93–94, 138.

1.3 ‘Dead men tell no tales’? Conclusions on the Robustness of Humorous Absurdity.¹³²

As I have argued, the different ways in which humorous absurdity contributes to the representation of the war zone indicates its durability. The authors considered may not have been consciously influenced by the pre-war texts in which humorous absurdity appeared, but the war poems in this chapter contain the same kind of humour, based on comic inversions and playfulness with logic, as is found in these earlier works. Such humour had the capacity to contribute to some arresting, subtle depictions of front-line experience, challenging the view that poetic aesthetics seen as traditional contributed to the representation of the war only by being ironised. The absurd incongruities of the kind found in the poems run counter to rational methods of explication, as Kant’s theory elucidates, and in the texts considered here this creates striking impressions of the war zone being experienced as a ridiculous sphere, removed from common sense. The effect is partly one of disquiet: there is a sense that the war zone is dehumanising, that servicemen have a status below that of rodents and that their lives are expendable resources of the military machine. As Kant suggests, our reason may not initially enjoy being challenged, being forced to oscillate between different perspectives as it tries to make sense of that which resists rational understanding, and to an extent the poems reflect this lack of pleasure: the serious ways in which the war does not make sense – the fact that it involves mass killing – may be the kind of senselessness that is threatening or worrying, rather than enjoyable. At the same time, though, humorous absurdity evokes and at points invites amusement. That is, each of the texts do have the potential to provoke pleasurable Kantian laughter, according to which the mind does ultimately find pleasure via the physical oscillation of the body. Speakers and protagonists are in addition portrayed as facetious, mischievous, and whimsical. They are, to borrow de Stein’s characterisation, sensitive to the ridiculous. This is true even of those texts in which there is most emphasis on solemnity: ‘Break of Day’ has playful and whimsical qualities that contrast the devastation recounted in the poem; Graves’ persona is associated with a sense of gallantry and joy as he embraces absurdity to triumph over it; ‘The Target’, though largely removed from humour, includes a laughable moment that arises from the impossibility of approaching the war zone with rationality.

The poems analysed in this chapter variously appeared in trench journals, in wartime collections, and in poetry periodicals; they are by a mixture of anonymous, little-recognised, and highly celebrated authors; and they vary between being entertaining, light-hearted, and mirth-inviting, to being disquieting and predominantly solemn. Humorous absurdity is a point of similarity between otherwise highly diverse texts, placing a buoyant poem like ‘Rats’ on a continuum with the graver meditations in such texts as ‘The Target’. Reading this variety of poems side by side and in the context of Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s incongruity theories reveals the ways in which humour is at work, subtly, in poems known for being sobering, as well as drawing out the complexities in verses that might otherwise be

¹³² De Stein, ‘Joseph Arthur Brown’, p. 75.

viewed as matters of entertainment alone, rather than illustrations of war experience worth considering for their representational powers.

Chapter 2: Trench Newspapers

Machine-Age Comedy and the Representation of Servicemen

Trench newspapers, or trench journals, were humorous periodicals that servicemen produced while in the armed forces, often in the challenging environments of training camps and the front line: the editor of the *Quaysider* wrote in 1914 of the ‘onerous task of literary composition under somewhat weird conditions’, including hearing ‘an occasional savage growl’ as a ‘comrade [...] squelches into an extra deep mud-pool’.¹ One such publication, the *Wipers Times*, has become relatively well known, having been reprinted in book form as well as featuring on television and the stage.² Such attention is likely related to the amount of material it affords, and to the engaging story of its production: it was founded following the discovery of an abandoned printing press in Belgium, whereas the creators of other servicemen’s periodicals sent manuscripts to the U.K. for reproduction, printed their work using army equipment, or wrote and circulated texts by hand.³ Produced via a range of methods, trench newspapers were also created by men in a variety of units. Contrary to what their name suggests, they were not made only by those serving in the trenches, but also by personnel from many different areas of the military posted to a range of theatres of war.⁴ They were composed predominantly for entertainment, for the amusement of their writers and readers, who could be officers, men, or a mixture of both groups.⁵ Editors also sometimes stated that the newspapers were historical records, not only sources of fun.⁶ The extent to which censorship affected the journals is difficult to establish, although, as Fuller notes, the rules printed in the *Minden Magazine* give some idea of what was prohibited: the editors were not allowed to include place names, to ‘discuss too minutely [...] our prolonged misunderstanding and unpleasantness with the Germans’, or to ‘criticise too freely our political enemies or friends’.⁷ Beyond this, ‘considerable freedom was allowed’, with editors able to pursue satirical coverage, including satire of

¹ ‘Quo Fata Vocant’, *Quaysider*, November 1914, p. 1.

² It is the subject of a BBC docudrama as well as a play that debuted in the West End and toured the U.K. in 2017: Ian Hislop and Nick Newman, *The Wipers Times*, BBC 2, 11 September 2013; Hislop and Newman, *The Wipers Times*, dir. by Caroline Leslie (2017). Recent book editions include: Westhorp, ed., *Wipers Times*; Malcolm Brown, ed., *The Wipers Times: The Complete Series of the Famous Wartime Trench Newspaper* (London: Little Books, 2006).

³ The *Wipers Times* ran from 1916 to December 1918 and all its issues survive (Fuller, pp. 9, 11).

⁴ Women in service, too, wrote comic periodicals. For example, the hospital team behind the *Wallacefield Christmas Book* wanted to show that ‘the gentlewomen of England’ ministered ‘to the literary and artistic tastes’ of wounded men as well as their medical needs (*Wallacefield Christmas Book*, December 1916). However, the contributors to the journals studied in this chapter belonged to male units, and so the term ‘servicemen’ is used.

⁵ Some newspapers were explicitly presented as being for men and officers, while senior officers at times also supported the journals. See, for example: ‘Editorial’, *Braganza*, May 1916, pp. 1–2 (pp. 1–2); ‘Editorial’, *Minor Offence*, December 1914; The Editors, ‘Foreword’, *Old Firm*, January 1917.

⁶ For examples of editors presenting their work as a historical record, see: ‘Editorial’, *Searchlight*, December 1914, pp. 4–5; ‘Editorial’, *B1: Chronicle of the Reserve Garrison Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers*, October 1917, p. 1; ‘Preface’, *Wallacefield Christmas Book*, December 1916. In 1917 the war office issued a General Routine Order requesting that war-related ephemera be deposited at the British Museum. See: John Pegum, ‘British Army Trench Journals and a Geography of Identity’, in *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History*, ed. by Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 129–47 (p. 131).

⁷ Fuller, p. 19.

the highest-ranking officers and of censorship itself.⁸ Such contents were designed to appeal to the journals' primary readership: servicemen who belonged to the units in which the magazines were produced. At times, though, it seems the newspapers were also read by members of the military more broadly, as well as being sent to those at home as souvenirs, and/or as insights into the military lives of their loved ones.⁹ A note added to one copy of the December 1917 edition of *Hangar Happenings* reads 'Thinking of you all a Merry Xmas, a happy new year. I will explain the jokes when I get my "Little bit of Heaven" Ernie', a hint both at the tightknit, primary military readership who would understand the in-jokes, and at a desire to communicate with those at home when finally in 'Heaven' – on leave.¹⁰

One of the most striking aspects of the newspapers is the pervasiveness of their humour: the representations of war experience they present are almost universally comic.¹¹ This chapter situates trench newspapers within the culture of comic production surrounding the war period, demonstrating how this culture underpins the humour in the periodicals and the picture of the war they present. I argue that the humour in trench newspapers, which tends to emerge from Bergsonian contrasts between human and machine, reproduces some well-established types of comic entertainment – those associated with mainstream, professionally produced comic periodicals, with music hall, and with film – and contributes to the representation of individuals adapting to military life.¹² This includes the portrayal of recruits as lacking a certain kind of idealised, heroic, martial masculinity that was associated with servicemen before and during the war, of military communications (orders, signalling, telephone exchanges) being subject to human fallibility, and of gaps and connections between military and civilian experience. Whereas the trench press counterbalanced romanticised images of soldiers as heroic, dashing adventurers, however, the depictions of soldiers in the papers also perpetuate an equally idealised image that circulated in the British home-front press, according to which model soldierliness incorporated a good sense of humour. The comic nature of the trench-newspaper genre supported the idea that British servicemen responded to military experience with amusement, and some trench-newspaper editorials inform readers that maintaining a sense of humour was crucial to the war effort.¹³ The stereotype of servicemen as humorous and light-hearted thus appears to have been one that trench-newspaper writers

⁸ Fuller, p. 19. To quote just one of many examples, the *718 W.T. Company's Magazine* defined the censor as 'a man who never buys comic papers' ('Definitions', *718 W.T. Company's Magazine*, September 1916, p. 3).

⁹ Fuller, pp. 9, 12; Seal, p. 128.

¹⁰ Ernie's Note, *Hangar Happenings*, December 1917. The *Braganza* editors, meanwhile, stated that their journal would 'enable those at home to take a yet keener interest in the doings and fortunes of their comrades across the water'. ('Editorial', *Braganza*, May 1916, pp. 1–2).

¹¹ Even so, some papers offered solemn reflection on the conflict, obituaries of fallen comrades, and casualty lists.

¹² Most trench newspapers began publication in 1915 as the new armies developed (Fuller, p. 11.), though some were continuations of existing military newspapers, for example the *Snapper: The Monthly Journal of the East Yorkshire Regiment*. Robert Nelson estimates that many military periodicals would have been produced in the long nineteenth century. I focus on comparing Great War trench newspapers with professionally-produced comic periodicals: the latter are more fitting reference points for considering portrayals of the war by and for an army heavily reliant on civilian recruits. *Snapper: The Monthly Journal of the East Yorkshire Regiment*, August 1914, p. 141; Robert L. Nelson, 'Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond', *War in History*, 17 (2010), 167–91 (p. 191).

¹³ The following chapter discusses in detail how ideals of soldierliness were articulated in the professional press.

could embrace.¹⁴ Indeed, this identity could be complementary to heroic images of soldiers, an outcome of or supplement to the fact that such images were unrealisable.

Bergson's famous theory of laughter, published in 1900 and translated into English by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell in 1911 as *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, is concerned with tensions between the mechanical and the human, making it especially fitted to explaining the prominent strand of trench-newspaper humour that relies on such dichotomies. Bergsonian contrasts between the mechanical and the organic appear in trench newspapers in the form of disparities between the military machine – which encourages regulation and automaton-like behaviour – and the human, fallible, and eccentric qualities of individual servicemen.¹⁵ Bergson's thinking illuminates how the representations of war experience in trench newspapers invite amusement, casting light on the relationship between the periodicals' dual aims of provoking humour and of recording war experience. Via his theory it is possible to tease out how the techniques used to invite amusement affect and contribute to the impression of the war created, especially how servicemen saw themselves in relation to the military machine. Largely an incongruity theorist, Bergson argues that humour stems from the perception of '*mechanical elasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being'.¹⁶ The 'attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine'.¹⁷ We 'laugh', Bergson says, 'every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'.¹⁸ For example, a man who 'stumbles and falls' when 'running along the street' provokes laughter because of the

involuntary element in this change – his clumsiness [...] Perhaps there was a stone on the road. He should have altered his pace or avoided the obstacle. Instead of that, through lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else.¹⁹

¹⁴ Trench newspapers often, in contrast, ridiculed other accounts of the military that featured in home-front papers – the *Whizz-Bang*, for instance, asked whether the *Daily Mail* staff 'would not be doing more good filling sandbags in France than emptying windbags in Fleet Street' ('Things We Want to Know', *Whizz-Bang*, January 1916, p. 4). However, editors were also delighted when their publications were acknowledged in professionally-run periodicals (Seal, pp. 123–29).

¹⁵ Popular comic periodicals included *Tomahawk*, *Judy*, *Fun*, the *Man in the Moon*, and *Punch*. The latter was by the mid-nineteenth century 'one of Britain's central cultural institutions' and I use it frequently as a reference point. (Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* [London: British Library, 2010], p. 1. Bergson had lectured in Britain and his work was reviewed in British journals, but this is not to say that trench journalists were aware of his ideas. (Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* [Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1996], p. 5).

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911), trans. by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914), p. 10.

¹⁷ Bergson, p. 29.

¹⁸ Bergson, p. 58.

¹⁹ Bergson, p. 9.

For Bergson, furthermore, laughter is ‘a sort of *social gesture*’, acting to redress or prevent outlandish behaviour. He speaks of ‘a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability’. This ‘rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective’.²⁰ By ‘the fear which it inspires’, laughter ‘restrains eccentricity [...] and in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity’.²¹ The humour in trench newspapers criticises that which is ‘mechanical[ly] inelastic’ in the sense that it presents the military machine as overregulated and inflexible. Indeed, as is explained in the main body of this chapter, the issues that form in trench newspapers around control and the machine-like align with the rebellion against mechanisation that Benjamin associates with mass cinematic entertainment in ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ (‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’) (1935). As with Bergson’s theory, though, the papers ultimately support the smooth running of the military – the ‘society’ to which the papers’ humour pertains.

Bergson’s and Benjamin’s ideas are part of the culture of ‘machine-age comedy’ that North discusses, a culture into which this chapter inserts trench newspapers.²² Chiming with my own approach to the study of humorous writing, North historicises a particular kind of humour. His focus is nineteenth-century forms of comic production: mass-market comic periodicals, vaudeville, and music hall.²³ Machine-age comedy has ‘traces of mechanical reproduction’, a ‘mechanical quality’, good examples being the jerky, automata-like movements involved in Charlie Chaplin’s physical comedy.²⁴ He suggests that there is ‘something potentially comic in mechanical reproduction itself’, this humorousness arising not only from repetition but from newness: the ‘repetitions of comedy’ prompt amusement partly because ‘each iteration’ appears to offer ‘something [...] new’.²⁵ For North, such comedy is a reflection of ‘mechanization in the modern period’, by which he means a period characterised by the rise of industrial technology, and especially mass production.²⁶ That being said, he also points out, particularly with references to the stock gags and sketches of vaudeville, that ‘the machine age had begun to affect comedy even before very much of it was mechanically reproduced’.²⁷ The humour in trench newspapers, borrowing from that of music hall, cinema, and mass-market comic magazines, echoes the kind of

²⁰ Bergson, p. 21.

²¹ Bergson, p. 20.

²² Differentiating his own work from Bergson’s, North highlights that Bergson does not take account of the ‘delight of the masses in comic routines that embodied modern mechanization’. Nevertheless, as a theory of humour based on ideas of the mechanical published at the start of the twentieth century, Bergson’s work is an important element in the history of machine-age comedy (North, p. 4).

²³ North, pp. 8–9.

²⁴ North, pp. 3–5.

²⁵ North, pp. 4–5, 200.

²⁶ North, p. 5. Trench newspapers were not mass-produced on the same scale as some of North’s examples. Remarkably large circulations included the magazine of the 7th Manchesters, ‘selling 26 000 copies in Egypt’, and the magazine of the 7th Canadians, which reached ‘almost 20,000 on the Western Front’ (Fuller, pp. 9–11).

²⁷ North, p. 9.

comedy that North associates with the rise of the machine age, in doing so reflecting such comedy's reproduced quality.

I thus interpret 'machine-age comedy' broadly, using the phrase to refer: first, to humour that results from reproduction and rewriting, and second, to humour that emerges from Bergsonian contrasts between rigidity and fluidity, efficiency and inaptness, from tensions between the mechanical (by which I mean that which is regulated, uniform, and repetitious) and the individual, eccentric, and what I call 'clownish'. This latter term is usually employed in a specific sense to refer to depictions of slapstick, Chaplinesque antics, though I also associate it with narrators and protagonists who are comically incongruous with idealised, heroic images of soldiers. Similarly to the way in which the traditions of nonsense literature surface in First World War poetry, forms of machine-age humour established before the war underpin the representation of war experience in trench newspapers, again indicating the durability of styles of humour already popular by 1914. Indeed, that machine-age comedy relies upon duplication helps to explain why it may have been replicated in trench newspapers, and hence why it endured so well. That is, the entertainment machine-age comedy afforded lay partly in the fact that it was reproduced, emerging from the same types of comic situations and characters being reiterated and adapted, and this encouraged rewriting – including rewriting for the purposes of addressing the subject of war.

To show the extent to which styles of humour associated with machine-age comedy featured across a range of trench newspapers, I have included periodicals that belonged to a variety of types of unit, and that were written and edited by a mixture of officers and men. Of the 32 trench newspapers cited in this chapter, thirteen belong to infantry units, four to medical, two to Army Service Corps, three to artillery or artillery cadets, three to cavalry or cavalry cadets, three to naval units, three to engineers, and one to a mixed unit. The widespread use of anonymity in the papers makes precise identification of their creators problematic, though Fuller's sample gives some indication of the mix of servicemen involved: 66 of the 107 newspapers he draws on have editors of identifiable rank; 27 were edited by officers, 25 by men of other ranks, and 14 by a combination of men and officers.²⁸ Several of the trench newspapers I cite were edited by officers or trainee officers (the *718 W.T. Company's Magazine*, the *Hangar Herald*, the *Wipers Times*, *Lines of Fire*, the *Hobocob*); others were edited or primarily written by servicemen who enlisted in the ranks (the *Fifth Gloucester Gazette* and the *Growler*); and a few marketed themselves to or had contributors from men and officers (the *Braganza*, the *Dump*, the *Periscope*, the *Searchlight*).²⁹ That machine-age humour appears repeatedly in a range of trench

²⁸ Fuller, p. 11.

²⁹ Cover, *718 W.T. Company's Magazine*, September 1916; 'Editorial', *Hangar Herald*, June 1915, p. 1; Westhorp, 'Introduction', *Wipers Times*; Cover, *Lines of Fire*, April 1918; Cover, *Hobocob*, December 1917. For the *Fifth Gloucester Gazette* see: James Grant Repshire, 'A True Tale of the Listening Post', *F. W. Harvey*, 2014 <<http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/fwharvey/2014/05/21/a-true-tale-of-the-listening-post/>> [accessed 3 August 2018]. For the *Growler*, which belonged to the Northumberland Fusiliers – not to be confused with the Royal Montreal Regiment's R.M.R. Growler – see: C. H. Cooke, *Historical Records of the Sixteenth (Service) Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Council of the Newcastle and Gateshead Incorporated Chamber of Commerce, 1923), p. 192; 'Editorial',

newspapers suggests its importance to the genre, though a longer study could devote space to other kinds of humour in the papers. It could also investigate possible divergences between the humour employed by men and by officers, or between that of men from different kinds of unit, though I have not found the journals listed above to be substantially different in their comedy.

In earlier studies of trench newspapers, there is primarily a concern with the magazines' psychological and military value. Fuller and Seal both approach trench newspapers as evidence for assessing how servicemen tolerated service, with Seal arguing that the journals helped soldiers to endure by giving them a voice, acting as a way for them to vent frustrations.³⁰ Fuller, meanwhile, uses the newspapers as evidence to argue that the continuance at the front of institutions and attitudes from civilian life, such as music-hall shows, sports fixtures, and humorous cynicism helped men to adjust to the military.³¹ Elsewhere, John Pegum proposes that trench newspapers aided the process of building effective martial personnel, helping to replace senses of personal identity with feelings of belonging to the military group.³² I, too, am concerned with the relationship between the newspapers and military identity, and my identification of new and often highly specific points of connection between the journals and pre-1914 comedy also adds weight to Fuller's assessment, which Seal echoes, that 'the war was not quite the chasm [...] sundering past from future, that it is sometimes depicted'.³³ Beyond this, I approach the newspapers for what they reveal about First World War representation itself, focusing on how machine-age comedy contributed to their portrayals of the conflict. This includes demonstrating how trench journalists' representations of servicemen variously reject and embrace different models of military masculinity in ways not covered in Pegum's study. Linking the journals to machine-age comedy, moreover, rather than treating them simply as amusing, helps to reveal the specificities of what their humour adds to the depiction of the war, and the particulars of how they were connected with established forms of popular humour.

Each section of this chapter discusses a different way in which machine-age humour contributes to the depiction of servicemen negotiating the military machine and ideals of martial masculinity. The first and second parts focus on the ways in which comic character types popular before 1914 appear in uniform in trench newspapers, as Chaplinesque, hapless recruits. The texts discussed in the third section depict contrasts between the contingencies of human action and the supposed efficiency of military communication. Finally, whereas the first three parts are based on themes found in the papers, the last centres on a prominent form in trench journals: parody. Trench-journal parodies both suggest a feeling of affection for civilian culture and mark differences between civilian and military life. In this respect they reflect the broader picture of the war given in the texts included in this chapter: they depict

Braganza, May 1916, pp. 1–2 (p. 1); 'Contributors', *Dump*, December 1915, p. 1; 'Editor's Notes', *Periscope*, December 1916, pp. 26–27 (p. 27); 'Greeting', *Searchlight*, December 1914, pp. 3–5 (pp. 3–4).

³⁰ Seal, pp. ix, 139.

³¹ Fuller, p. 175; Koenraad Du Point echoes these points in his assessment of French, Italian, and Belgian trench newspapers (Du Pont, 'Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers', in Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, pp. 107–21).

³² Pegum, p. 137.

³³ Fuller, p. 154; Seal, pp. x–xi.

individuals attempting, or being compelled, to turn themselves into parts of a military machine – recruits grappling with military identity, and their entanglements with the life, administration, and technology of war.

2.1 Charlie Chaplin and the Reproducibility of the Clownish Serviceman.

Benjamin mentions ‘illustrated papers’ as part of the culture of reproduction with which he is concerned in ‘Work of Art’, and trench newspapers belong to the kind of ‘technological reproduction’ that in the twentieth century ‘gained a place for itself among artistic modes’.³⁴ This is the kind of reproduction in art that Benjamin associates with the ‘liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage’, and that he saw as being strikingly different from art that is ‘underpinned by ritual’, from artworks approached as having religious significance, such as religious statues, that have a power depending on a ‘one-of-a-kind’ value.³⁵ Benjamin’s primary interest is the cinema, and servicemen enjoyed performances by a number of comic film actors, with Charlie Chaplin being ‘an established favourite of the troops’, and appearing regularly in the cartoons and jokes of the trench press.³⁶ Contributors to trench newspapers frequently compared servicemen to Chaplin, with many depictions of soldiers having Chaplinesque, clownish qualities, the clown-like serviceman featuring almost ubiquitously in the genre. I argue that this kind of comic type or stock character was especially robust, enduring into the war period partly because associated with reproduction: the Tramp has an everyman quality that lends itself to iteration and rewriting. This sense of machine-like repetitiveness means that the Chaplinesque servicemen who appear in the trench newspapers speak to concerns with the relationship between that which is human and individual, and that which is mechanised, anonymous, and regulated. Such concerns relate specifically to the tension of servicemen being, simultaneously, individuals and cogs in the military machine, as Bergson’s and Benjamin’s ideas help to elucidate. As is outlined below, Benjamin is concerned with the horror of mechanisation that can lie behind humour, and with the capacity of popular entertainment to act as a riposte to this, while the papers’ representation of military life tends to privilege Bergsonian flexibility over rigidity and inelasticity. Also as with Bergson’s philosophy, though, the periodicals have a corrective element that works in favour of the society – in this case the military – in which they are produced. Bergson uses an analogy of a ‘youth enter[ing] one of our military academies’ as one illustration of how laughter corrects eccentricity:

After getting through the dreaded ordeal of the examination, he finds he has other ordeals to face, which his seniors have arranged with the object of fitting him for the new life he is entering upon [...]. Every small society that forms within the larger is thus impelled [...] to devise some

³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), trans. by J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin 2008), pp. 10, 5.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Work of Art*, pp. 7–8, 35, 26, 11.

³⁶ Hanna, ‘Putting the Moral into Morale: YMCA Cinemas on the Western Front, 1914–1918’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 35 (2015), 615–30 (p. 623).

method of discipline or “breaking in”, so as to deal with the rigidity of habits that have been formed elsewhere and have now to undergo a partial modification. [...] Such must be the function of laughter.³⁷

Reflecting the process described in this example, humour in trench papers sees servicemen reconcile themselves to joining the military machine, taking pleasure in doing so via depictions of their fictionalised counterparts’ comic struggles in training and in service. Although soldiers’ fallible individuality, as it is represented in trench newspapers, counteracts idealised stereotypes of servicemen as heroic and dashing, it also perpetuates another stereotype according to which they conducted their military service with stoical, self-deprecating humour.

Hypatia, girlfriend of a fictional Private named Horace whose correspondence appeared in the *Growler* between January 1915 and July 1916, writes to her lover that ‘I will be very happy when you come up here and I would never dream of comparing you to Charlie Chaplin’.³⁸ Her reference to the star of film and stage is one of many in trench newspapers that relate him to servicemen. To give just a few examples, a piece in the *Growler* describes a billeting officer as having such a ‘collection of hats and sticks’ that ‘you never know whether he’s meant to represent Winston Churchill or Charlie Chaplin’; in the December 1915 issue of the *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, meanwhile, the ‘Things We Want to Know’ column includes mention of an N.C.O. [Non-Commissioned Officer] whose nickname is ‘Charlie Chaplin’, and drawings of Chaplin are found in the *Whizz-Bang* of January 1916, the *Lines of Fire* of June 1918 (the caption of which is an irreverent dig at ‘the Sergeant-Major’), and the *Buzzer* of February 1916, as well as elsewhere (figures 3–5).³⁹ The cover of the October 1915 edition of the *Growler*, similarly, shows a cartoon of Chaplin next to members of the battalion who have adopted trappings of his costume (figure 6), and the cartoon soldier illustrating many *Growler* covers, with his oversized feet and hat, is also decidedly clown-like (figures 7–10).⁴⁰ Chaplin’s Tramp character had only been seen for the first time in early 1914, not long after the comedian’s move into film from vaudeville, but this persona seems to have already become familiar by the early years of the conflict, having been preceded by similar characters in Chaplin’s first films and as part of Fred Karno’s music-hall company.⁴¹ The progression of Chaplin’s career from stage to screen illustrates North’s observation, already noted, that early comic cinema developed from and reflected vaudeville, an example of continuity in humorous art

³⁷ Bergson, pp. 134–35.

³⁸ ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, October 1915, pp. 4–7 (p. 7).

³⁹ ‘Billets’, *Growler*, March 1916, pp. 10–11 (p. 10); ‘Things We Want to Know’, *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, 1 December 1915; P. D. M., ‘Some Chaplinisms’, *Whizz-Bang*, January 1916; ‘Peeps into the Future. No.2: Cadet Chaplin, C, Interviews the Sergeant-Major’, *Lines of Fire*, June 1918, p. 20; ‘Charlie Chaplin & His Favourite Paper’, *Buzzer*, February 1916.

⁴⁰ Cover, *Growler*, October 1915. Cooke notes that the *Growler* cover showed ‘many of the “characters” in the battalion’ (Cooke, p. 192).

⁴¹ Frank Scheide, ‘Chaplin, Sir Charles Spencer [Charlie] (1889–1977)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30917>> [accessed 29 August 2018].

that reflects the durability I identify in the aesthetics of machine-age comedy from the pre-war into the wartime period.⁴²



Figure 3: P. D. M., 'Some Chaplinisms', *The Whizz-Bang*, January 1916.

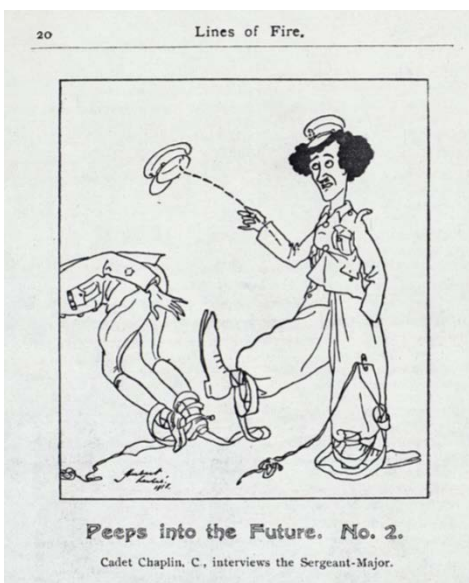


Figure 4: 'Peeps into the Future. No. 2: Cadet Chaplin, C, Interviews the Sergeant-Major', *Lines of Fire*, June 1918, p. 20.



Figure 5: 'Charlie Chaplin & His Favourite Paper', *The Buzzer*, February 1916.

⁴² North, p. 9. Indeed, by 1914 cinema and music hall were actually merged: cinema became a 'regular feature on a music-hall programme, having first been included in 1896' (Mullen, *The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* [Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015], p. 42).

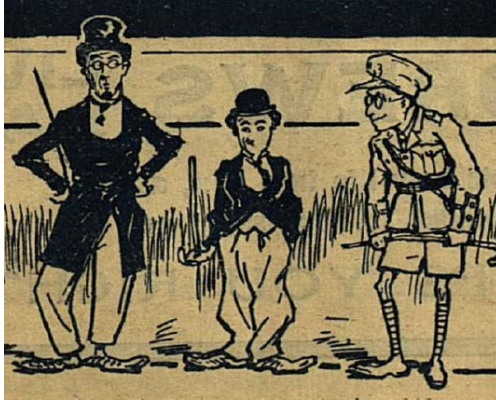


Figure 6: C. O. Wade, Cover, *The Growler*, October 1915.



Figure 7: Cover, *The Growler*, January 1915.



Figure 8: Cover, *The Growler*, March 1915.



Figure 9: Cover, *The Growler*, April 1915.



Figure 10: Cover, *The Growler*, July 1915.

Trench newspapers, at times, in fact foreshadowed Chaplin's own take on the war in his extremely successful 1918 film *Shoulder Arms*, early in which the comedian is pictured taking part in a drilling exercise.⁴³ Chaplin is shown to be hopelessly out of step with his fellow recruits, completely confused about where and how to turn, unable to make his unruly body behave in the strict ways demanded, and capable of unsettling the efforts of his fellow recruits.⁴⁴ This comic drilling bears a close resemblance to depictions of the exercise that appear in trench newspapers. As Horace points out, 'Battalion Drill is extremely difficult to master, and I expect it is the last stage in an officer's training', a hint at the potential for drilling going wrong that is exploited to comic effect elsewhere.⁴⁵ Examples include 'The Grouper's Army Guide', published in the *RAMC Depot Magazine* (June 1916), and 'The Officers' School at Squad Drill', which appeared in the *Braganza* (May 1916). The text in the *RAMC Depot Magazine* takes the form of a beginner's guide to army life, specifically a section on 'Squad Drill'. Its author indulges in light-hearted and not unaffectionate mockery of the pretensions and frustrations of the practice of drilling. His definition of a 'squad' sets the tone: 'new chums will be stood up in the middle of the parade-ground and called a squad'. They 'will subsequently be called a good many other things, too, by a highly charged, choleric sergeant-instructor'.⁴⁶ 'No aesthetic stances are allowed', and anyone who drills 'languidly with his hands in his pockets', or 'with his whole attitude suggestive of newly washed pants on a clothes line' faces punishment. After 'a long and incoherent explanation as to the attitude of your body, head, and arms, the length of your pace and the time at which you are to take it', the sergeant will 'obligingly take two or three steps all by himself'. Here, there is no permission for 'fancy stunts or speciality turns'. 'You [...] all have to march at the same pace and all in the same straight line'. Once these 'simpler movements' can be performed 'without accidents' men will 'learn how to make patterns', like 'forming fours'.⁴⁷ The guide concludes with a warning about mistakes: men 'violently collide, injure themselves disastrously, and perhaps threaten the whole discipline of our war'; nothing 'looks so absolutely beastly rotten' as 'men falling about in all directions, nursing their toes, and rubbing their solar plexi'.⁴⁸ The *Braganza* text is similar. The speaker – 'our Special Correspondent at Winnall Down Camp' – reports on how those in attendance at the 'Officers' School' perform at drill. He describes how they fell in, stating that 'there was no sign of that anxious hurry and feverish haste which is so characteristic of the nervous recruit'. They 'strolled on to parade one after the other, calm, serene and dignified', giving 'an impression of imperturbable good-humour'. Swiftly, however, things started to go wrong. "'Right turn". Mr J-H-S-N turns left and Mr S-H-M-R curses squad drill and all its works in four different languages'. With 'Left turn', 'Mr J-H-S-N turns right; Mr S-H-M-R still curses'. Forming fours

⁴³ Charlie Chaplin, dir., *Shoulder Arms*, (Charles Chaplin Productions, 1918); Peter Ackroyd, *Charlie Chaplin* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014), p. 11.

⁴⁴ In a 1911 work, A. A. Milne sends-up this kind of physical comedy in cinema by imagining slapstick events taking place as part of an actor's everyday life. ('The Diary of a Cinema Actor', *Punch*, 25 October 1911, p. 294).

⁴⁵ 'Horace to Hypatia', *Growler*, April 1915, pp. 6–7 (p. 6).

⁴⁶ 'The Grouper's Army Guide', *RAMC Depot Magazine*, 2 June 1916, pp. 7–8 (p. 7).

⁴⁷ 'Grouper's', p. 7.

⁴⁸ 'Grouper's', p. 8.

is ‘executed with consummate skill, the only possible objection being that half the squad forms fives – otherwise very smart’, and ‘Mr S-H-M-R is still cursing in four different languages’. When asked to form squad on the right, ‘Half the squad, in their laudable belief that bold initiative is essential to any successful military enterprise, form squad on the left’. On a second attempt, ‘Mr W-L-K-R, [...] wishing to introduce a little variety into an otherwise dull entertainment, decides to mark time two paces’. The result is ‘hideous chaos and indescribable confusion’. For fifteen minutes, ‘Mr W-L-K-R and everyone whom in his zeal he has pushed into the wrong place, engage in a violent and acrimonious dispute as to where they should be’.⁴⁹

These texts represent the activity of drilling as full of slapstick mishap, servicemen appearing as error-prone and slapdash, far from having the slickness that might be associated with professional soldiers. There is a highly Bergsonian quality to their portrayal. They are depicted as automata, as wind-up toys that collide: one of the examples Bergson gives to illustrate his view of humour is that of ‘toy soldiers standing behind one another. Push the first and it tumbles down on the second’, and this continues ‘until they all lie prone on the floor’.⁵⁰ If, as Bergson proposes, humour is to do with correcting mechanical rigidity in favour of human flexibility, then here the amusement invited acts as a riposte to the strictures of drilling. Partly this is framed as teasing of officers or the officer class. The linguistic aptitude of Mr S-H-M-R’s cursing hints at a good education being put to disreputable purposes, and ‘The Officers’ School’ (in Bergsonian terms) lampoons the trainees’ initial mechanical, puppet-like attempts to conform to the stereotype of the unflappable officer, humorously undermining their staged insouciance.⁵¹ The latter text is written by an anonymous member of the 24th (County of London) Battalion, London Regiment; the satire here may be an officer’s self-deprecation or an irreverent swipe from a serviceman of lesser rank. Certainly, as already mentioned, censorship was sufficiently relaxed that a large part of the amusement the periodicals afforded came from comic grousing, which included mockery of senior officers. In the drilling texts, as with the journals more broadly, the satire is predominantly good-humoured and inclusive rather than Juvenalian. These accounts of drilling are against regulation and authority to the extent that Chaplin’s portrayals of disruptively clownish characters are: the entertainment stems from the depiction of the fallible individual caught up in a regulated system, not simply from mockery of the system itself.

Benjamin observes that in Chaplin’s work ‘the human being is integrated into the film image by way of his gestures’:

⁴⁹ Special Correspondent at Winnall Down Camp, ‘The Officers’ School at Squad Drill’, *Braganza*, 1 May 1916, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Bergson, p. 80.

⁵¹ Similarly, an account of ‘My Career in the “Terriers”’ sees the narrator record his experiences because he is ‘a rather important personage’, explaining that ‘About five years ago I agreed, with my Pater’s permission, to “honour” the Gunners of a certain Territorial Company with my presence in their midst’. Cushy Bill, ‘My Career in the “Terriers”’, *Gambardier*, March 1915, p. 12.

Chaplin dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. [...] Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat – always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic sequence to human motorial functions. Now, what is it about this behaviour that is distinctively comic?’⁵²

As North points out, Benjamin does not explicitly answer his own question, but his comment draws attention to a close relationship between humour and the mechanisation of the human.⁵³ Benjamin observes that individuals can become part of the mass entertainment they consume, reflecting the closeness between audience and artwork in the trench-newspaper genre: ‘the weekly newsreel, for example, gives everyone an opportunity to rise from passer-by to film extra. [W]e may even, in this way, find [ourselves] transported into a work of art’.⁵⁴ This process involves the individual, as in Benjamin’s description of Chaplin above, merging with mechanised media. One version of this is the illustration from the *Growler* above in which specific servicemen have been drawn as versions of Chaplin (figure 6), in this case the amalgamation of individual and mass media having gone one step further, in the sense that the men depicted have actually taken on the endlessly-reproduced trappings of popular cinema’s key figure.

The drawings, as with the Bergsonian contrasts between man and machine that appear in trench newspapers more broadly, invite amusement, but this humour expresses servicemen’s sense that their individuality may be threatened. Named only as ‘the recruit’ in *Shoulder Arms*, as Michael Hammond explains, Chaplin faces the depersonalising forces of the military, yet his physical individuality and the pathos and empathy his character creates also work against becoming no more than ‘a cog in the military machine’.⁵⁵ The ‘human-ness’ Chaplin displays in *Shoulder Arms* contrasts the ‘inhuman conditions of the front’.⁵⁶ Fuller explains that British troops were seen first and foremost as civilians in uniform rather than military men as such, and the expressions of Chaplinesque individuality reflect this.⁵⁷ Chaplin drew on music-hall traditions to use his body and the trappings of his costume to become a source of disruption to strict regimes, the most famous instance of this being the production line in *Modern Times* (1936). Such early Chaplin films as *The Bank* (1915) and *Work* (1915) were set within ‘regulated environs’, foreshadowing the military setting of *Shoulder Arms*.⁵⁸ Like Chaplin’s characters, the drilling servicemen in the texts from the *RAMC Depot Magazine* and the *Braganza* have disobedient bodies that

⁵² Benjamin, ‘The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression’ (1935), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3 1935–1938*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002), pp. 94–95 (p. 94).

⁵³ North, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, *Work of Art*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Michael Hammond, ‘“So Essentially Human”: The Appeal of Charles Chaplin’s *Shoulder Arms* in Britain, 1918’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 8 (2010), 297–313 (pp. 307–10).

⁵⁶ Hammond, pp. 307–10.

⁵⁷ Fuller, p. 159.

⁵⁸ Hammond, p. 304.

disrupt attempts to regulate. The comedy of ‘The Grouper’s Army Guide’ in particular stems from representing drilling as aiming to eliminate all aspects of individual personality: characteristic ‘aesthetic stances’ and displays of mood like ‘deep meditation’ are banned, it being crucial for the soldiers to make ‘patterns’, and it is through the introduction of ‘enterprise’ and ‘variety’ that drilling goes wrong. The slapstick comedy arises from a stark contrast between individuals subject to unique quirks and fallibility, and a requirement to become cogs in the army’s mechanistic workings.

As in Benjamin’s conception of film more broadly, the papers’ humour retaliates against mechanisation: Benjamin commented of early cinema that ‘the majority of citydwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus’ and ‘In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf’, in part ‘by asserting *his* humanity [...] against the apparatus’ (‘perform[ing] in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone’ is ‘to preserve one’s humanity in the face of the apparatus’), but also ‘by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph’.⁵⁹ Such a process is at work in the texts about drilling: servicemen’s working hours are devoted to military ‘apparatus’, but in their leisure time trench newspapers afford a kind of comic ‘revenge’ on the military machine of which they are part. Though trench-newspaper humour invites amusement in response to the process of men becoming part of the military machine, however, it may also be the case that, as in the slapstick that Benjamin discusses, those who wrote and read the papers were recognising in their humour the ‘horror’ of such technology. Benjamin argues that ‘slapstick comedy is tendentious’, its ‘target’ being ‘technology’: slapstick film ‘is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror. The obverse of a ludicrously liberated technology is the lethal power’ of military might.⁶⁰ The horror that lurks behind trench-newspaper manifestations of machine-age humour is that of dehumanisation – in Saunders’ words, ‘the differences between war *matériel* and human beings [were] elided’ – the fear that the military may have the capacity to sweep everything, including people, into its course of mechanised destruction.⁶¹

The Chaplinesque servicemen that appear in the texts discussed tend towards being formulaic character types – in this sense they are themselves mechanistic and depersonalised figures – even while contributing to the introduction of disruptive individuality, a paradox that is identified and elucidated in North’s theory of machine-age humour. The tension involved in character types expressing individuality parallels the relationship in machine-age humour between the repeated and the new. Chaplin, North argues, was ‘just as popular for always appearing in the same costume – the famous cane, bowler hat,

⁵⁹ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version’ (1935/36), in *Selected Writings Volume 3*, pp. 101–33 (p. 111).

⁶⁰ Specifically, for Benjamin, the might of ‘naval squadrons on manoeuvre’ seen in *Potemkin*. See: Benjamin, ‘Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz’ (1927), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 1927–1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), pp.16–19 (p. 17).

⁶¹ Saunders, ‘Material culture and conflict: the Great War, 1914–2003’, in *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory, and the First World War*, ed. by Nicholas Saunders (London, 2004), pp. 5–25 (p. 9).

and tiny moustache – as he was for surprising his audience with outrageous gags’.⁶² Influenced by Benjamin, North suggests as an analogy for machine-age humour the factory assembly line constantly making new versions of the same thing, writing that the ‘repetitions of comedy prompt laughter instead of surprise because they are familiar, and [...] each iteration has something in it that seems new’.⁶³ In the case of the trench newspapers, this takes the form of recurrent comic characters and character types who disrupt military regulation and uniformity. Such duplication occurs not only across the trench-newspaper genre as a whole but also within individual periodicals: the clownish servicemen that appear on the *Growler* covers above are good examples. As North emphasises, it is from the reproduced and reproducible quality of machine-age comedy that invitations to amusement arise, contributing to the popularity of this kind of comedy: Chaplin and Chaplinesque characters appear repeatedly in trench newspapers because their humour emerges partly from their reiteration, encouraging duplication and adding to the durability of machine-age comedy. Speculating over the reasons for Chaplin’s popularity amongst servicemen, Fuller suggests that his style of humour was particularly fitted to the nature of the conflict as a whole, which he notes Phillip Gibbs described in 1920 as being, in an ‘enormous’ way, like ‘a highly dignified man’ slipping on orange peel.⁶⁴ The explanation requires too strong a connection to be made between a broad interpretation of the war in general and a quite specific element of trench-newspaper humour. A more precise reason for the recurrent presence of Chaplinesque humour in the journals is its reproducibility. Bergson argued that comic characters are often types because ‘every resemblance to a type has something comic in it’, while North, as explained above, draws attention to the importance of reproduction in machine-age comedy, seeing this variety of humour as analogous to a production line repeatedly making new iterations of the same object. (North and Benjamin focus on similar kinds of cultural production, such as Chaplin’s work, but North elucidates why these productions are amusing, a question that Benjamin does not tackle in a substantial way.)⁶⁵ The practice of taking amusement from the formulaic in the papers is in fact at times fairly explicit, with servicemen representing themselves and their comrades as members of particular categories. A good example is a set of illustrations entitled ‘Types in the Army’ published in the *Whizz-Bang* of March 1916 (figures 11–13). These images also resemble cigarette cards, giving them a further connection to a culture of reproduction.⁶⁶

⁶² North, pp. 4–5.

⁶³ North, p. 200.

⁶⁴ Fuller, p. 112.

⁶⁵ Bergson, p. 148.

⁶⁶ In the early-twentieth century, tobacco manufacturers issued thousands of cards on varied themes including, during the Great War, gas masks. Alan Blum, ‘Cigarette Cards — Irony in Propaganda’, *Tobacco Control*, 4 (1995), 117–18 (p. 117).



Figure 11: 'Types in the Army. – No. 2', *The Whizz-Bang*, March 1916, p. 7.



Figure 12: 'Types in the Army. – No. 3', *The Whizz-Bang*, March 1916, p. 9.



Figure 13: 'Types in the Army. – No. 4', *The Whizz-Bang*, March 1916, p. 12.

The duplicated nature of machine-age, Chaplinesque humour, as well as the Bergsonian contrasts it can involve between the mechanistic and the human, in summary, help to create portrayals of servicemen as clownishly error-prone, emphasising fallibility that contrasts military demands for order, anonymity, and uniformity. These portrayals, and the attitudes behind them, are more complex and equivocal than their humorousness may at first suggest. Humour in trench newspapers has a Bergsonian corrective function, criticising the military as being absurdly over-regulated and too suspicious of human

individuality. In this sense trench-newspaper humour is part of the culture that Benjamin identifies in early film: the periodicals involve a form of entertainment that relies on reproduction and repetition (drawing on the industry of mass, popular periodicals) being used to challenge mechanisation and the horrors of dehumanisation. That Chaplin's work also involves this kind of process helps to explain why he, and characters resembling him, appears so frequently in trench newspapers. At the same time, though, the satirical, critical element of trench newspapers is Horatian; the comical, fallible servicemen the periodicals depict struggle with the military machine, but do not encourage or represent serious resistance to it. Either way, machine-age comedy lends itself to the depiction of the complex relationship in military life between regulation and individuality. Similarly to the ways in which humorous absurdity is an especially evocative means of creating impressions of the war zone as ridiculous and odd, the structures on which machine-age comedy is built – its reproduced, reproducible quality and the tensions it involves between the individual and the mechanistic – complement the articulation of a sense of individual servicemen trying to fit into the military machine. Indeed, the importance of reproduction in machine-age humour helps to explain why it endured into trench newspapers from pre-war culture. This kind of humour invites amusement from the reiteration of familiar character types and situations: machine-age humour relies upon and encourages its own duplication.

2.2 The Soldier-Hero, American Humour, and the Comic Knut.

As well as representing the military machine as extreme in its regulation, the Bergsonian contrasts in the texts explored above between servicemen's fallibility and the military machine point to a broader trend in trench newspapers for counter-narratives to idealised depictions of soldiers that circulated before and during the war. In the drilling texts recruits are described, ironically, as being 'the same stern, strong, silent men that have made England what she is to-day', and as presenting a 'touching spectacle' in the form of 'young Officers preparing to fight for Britain's freedom'.⁶⁷ Equally, Hypatia's disingenuous reassurance that Horace is not like Chaplin adds to the sense that her lover eagerly but unsuccessfully tries to play the hero: Chaplin seems to be a shorthand for the difficulties of exuding martial dignity. When Hypatia advises Horace about his new uniform – 'please insist upon a perfect fit, because your first coat did look so short and funny' – she highlights an item of clothing reminiscent of Chaplin's famous Tramp costume to raise a practical problem that surely has a metaphorical implication.⁶⁸ Though they are far from embodying the gentlemanly courage, competence, and dutifulness given to soldiers in fiction, newspapers, and recruitment literature, however, the Chaplinesque characters, as with the character types considered below, propagate a stereotype of servicemen as adopting stoicism and amusement in response to the war.⁶⁹ In this section I demonstrate how such negotiations of military masculinity take place through soldiers being given the bumbling,

⁶⁷ 'Grouper's', p. 8; Special Correspondent at Winnall Down Camp, p. 14.

⁶⁸ 'Horace to Hypatia', *Growler*, February 1915, pp. 4–5 (p. 4).

⁶⁹ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

bombastic qualities associated with pre-war American humour, and in some cases being cast as wartime manifestations of the ‘knut’, a slang term for a type of well-dressed man-about-town, who was also a figure of fun.⁷⁰ Again, the texts analysed speak to the influence of pre-1914 comic productions on trench newspapers, and to the capacity of these productions to be adapted to the wartime situation. As with the machine-age comedy that Benjamin and North discuss, the popularity of comic types such as the knut was due to the fact that, in being stock characters, they were easily rewritten and adapted.

The *Growler*’s Horace is an excellent example of a trench-newspaper serviceman who struggles to meet the demands of the military. The letters between Horace and Hypatia cover, humorously, a range of aspects of life in the battalion, from complaints about the discomforts and frustrations of army training, to the difficulties of communication between those within and without the military, to light-hearted gossip. The couple are at a ridiculous remove from their classical namesakes, and Horace’s clumsy attempts to exude greatness are a particularly striking reflection of this. Hypatia’s remarks often betray Horace’s junior status, undermining his attempts to make himself appear important. She writes: ‘I feel sure you will be something big before the war is over, because promotion is so very rapid’; ‘I met a girl yesterday whose brother is a ¼ master sergeant or a lance-corporal’; ‘I am sending you a pipe as it looks more man-like than a cigarette’; ‘It was very cruel to reprimand you for not shaving’ as ‘you haven’t anything to shave’; and ‘Do you think you could manage to get stripes before you come to Newcastle. Can’t you ask at the Orderly Room?’⁷¹ He tells her, meanwhile, ‘I expect a couple of stripes when the rush is over’, but ‘don’t put “Corporal” on my letters until I wire you’; he claims to have ‘carried three rifles belonging to chaps who were rather “knocked” on a forty mile route march; he uses his shrapnel helmet as a ‘splendid wash basin’; and he is an expert at making tea provided somebody else makes the fire, heats the water, and ‘adds the necessary tea, milk and sugar’.⁷² Elsewhere, he divulges that he entered a marching competition and ‘did only half the distance’ because ‘I wanted to see if your precious letter was waiting at the hut for me’, that ‘I would have entered for our Easter Sports but I know my form and didn’t want to humiliate the competitors’, and that he ‘did very well’ at shooting, so much so that ‘the fellows near the targets were so delighted with my marksmanship that they frequently waved coloured flags’.⁷³ From the front, he tells her that ‘You want to know how many Germans I’ve killed or seen – Adorable one! I simply CAN’T count them’, and that ‘In time I’m sure the post of official interrupter [sic] will be offered to me – my accent is so good – much too good for small villages’.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Lynda Mugglestone, ‘How to Be “knuts” for War: Refashioning Male Identity in WW1’, *English Words in Wartime: Tracking Language on the Move in WW1*, 2016 <<https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com/2016/08/22/how-to-be-knuts-for-war-fashioning-male-identity-in-ww1/#more-2440>> [accessed 30 July 2018].

⁷¹ ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, October 1915, pp. 4–7 (pp. 4, 8).

⁷² ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, March 1916, pp. 4–8 (p. 5); ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, April 1915, pp. 6–7 (p. 7); ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, July 1916, pp. 5–10 (p. 5).

⁷³ This in fact meant that targets had been missed. ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, August 1915, pp. 5–7 (pp. 7, 5).

⁷⁴ ‘Horace to Hypatia’, *Growler*, March 1916, pp. 4–8 (p. 4).

The letters are typical of what was a staple feature of trench newspapers: narratives with comic protagonists who stumble through military life, far from being the epitome of competence and composure. Particularly popular were mock diaries in which fictional servicemen record the many trials of their work, in doing so revealing fears, anxieties, inadequacies, and frustrations. In the *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, an initially over-confident narrator suggests to his Company Commander that he did not believe there were any Germans in the opposite trenches, only for the commander to reply: ‘in that case I was just the man he wanted, and would I go across at 9.30 p.m. and find out’. The prospect of a raid on enemy trenches prompts great anxiety, as well as teasing from the men he is meant to be leading: ‘Found Patrol whistling “Dead March” in unison. Tell patrol we will wait a bit’. The raid itself does not go completely smoothly: ‘Fall over trip-wire into several tin cans. Suspect Corporal of using bad language about me’; ‘Reprove patrol for being unobservant. Flare shows my Germans to be trees. Suspect patrol of sniggering’.⁷⁵ This is the flavour of other mock diaries published in the trench press, including a 1915 ‘Diary of [an] Officer on Duty’ (‘Reprove servant for calling me too early. Find it isn’t servant but dug-out falling in’), and a 1918 ‘Day in the Life of a Field Ambulance Medical Officer’ (‘8.35 C.O. [commanding officer] inspecting last section. Find I am without “Sam Browne”, box-respirator, gloves [...] 8.36 Pray to a kindly fate to protect me’).⁷⁶ In 1916 the *Plum and Apple* printed a humorous ‘Day in the Diary of a Private’, and in 1918 the *Mudhook* included an equally comic ‘Extracts from the Diary of an R.N.D. [Royal Naval Division]’.⁷⁷ Some 1917 ‘Leaves from an Orderly Dog’s Diary’ included such comments as ‘Allow Orderly Sgt. to show me how untidy Billets can be. Consider mirth untimely and ill-disguised when I fall down ladder and bend nose’, while a 1914 ‘Extract from the Diary of an Orderly Officer’ sees the narrator explain how he ‘looked at the guard all over twice, and stupidly forgot what the word of command was to get rid of them. Too shy to ask’.⁷⁸

Similar comic characters appear in other trench-newspaper tales not in diary form. These include an officer who accidentally takes men to be inoculated when they were meant to be having an eye test, a private who suffers great tribulation over his pack (‘even a haversack sometimes fails to follow the example of the Marines, and “take in everything”’), and a serviceman responsible for transport who struggles with mechanics (‘I can start a motor [...] and I could stop one if nothing else stopped it first, but of what happens in between these two motions I have only a very vague idea’).⁷⁹ Elsewhere, a junior subaltern describes how he came to be wearing ‘the Colonel’s best pair of trousers’: he loses his own and finds himself caught in front of his commander – ‘He wasn’t a young man, and the shock seemed

⁷⁵ ‘Extracts from the Diary of O.C., Reconnoitring Patrol’, *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, 12 July 1915.

⁷⁶ ‘Diary of [an] Officer on Duty’, *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, 1 December 1915; Professor Meinzer, ‘One Day in the Life of a Field Ambulance Medical Officer’, *Lead-Swinger*, 12 August 1918, pp. 486–89 (p. 486).

⁷⁷ ‘A Day in the Diary of a Private’, *Plum and Apple*, August 1916, pp. 7–9 (p. 8); M. Trench Mortar Officer, ‘Extracts from the Diary of an R.N.D.’, *Mudhook*, October 1918.

⁷⁸ ‘Leaves from an Orderly Dog’s Diary (Bowglerised)’, *Old Firm*, January 1917, pp. 10–11 (p. 10); ‘Extract From the Diary of an Orderly Officer’, *Minor Offense*, December 1914, pp. 6–7 (p. 6).

⁷⁹ ‘A True Story’, *Kinglet*, December 1917, pp. 10–11; The Scribe, ‘The Tragedy of Private Skeggs’ Pack’, *Lead-Swinger*, 6 November 1915, pp. 24–25; Vampire, ‘Motors: A Few Orderly Remarks’, *Lead-Swinger*, 12 August 1918, pp. 470–71 (p. 470).

to unman him. || My khaki shirt flapped cheerily'.⁸⁰ In the *Gambardier* a naval serviceman mistakes a milk tin for an enemy submarine – 'How was I to know that one of Nestlé's milk tins had run adrift?' – and in the *Kinglet* an officer bluffs his way through questions about the men and equipment under his control, having been summoned by the phrase 'The C.O. wishes to see you, Sir' just after 'partaking of one of those lunches which render one unfit for further duty for the rest of the day'.⁸¹

These texts create pictures of servicemen that are humorous counter-narratives to idealised portrayals of soldiers that became particularly influential before the start of the war. 'In the nineteenth century', the 'figure of the imperial soldier hero [...] was one of the most potent and widespread images of idealised masculinity in cultural circulation', featuring in 'history, fiction, children's literature, on the lecture circuit and in newspapers', and this image of masculinity continued into First World War strategies of recruitment and propaganda.⁸² Servicemen, in Lois Bibbings' words, were presented as 'exemplary', the 'pinnacle of aspirational manliness', as 'gentlemanly male[s]' who 'embraced truthfulness, courage, honour and obligation'.⁸³ Jessica Meyer demonstrates that in writing by Great War soldiers, one of the main identities presented is an ideal 'to be emulated and striven towards', a heroism associated 'with the battlefield and the homosocial society of the military sphere'.⁸⁴ The trench-newspaper servicemen above find themselves in the midst of the military world without having adopted the valiant identity it seems to require: in Bergsonian terms, their human idiosyncrasies contrast the heroic ideal, presenting a different identity that expresses its unrealisable nature. The *Horace* letters in addition mock the second aspect of identity that Meyer argues servicemen aspired to, an identity 'located [...] in relation to women with its emphasis on men's roles as good sons, husbands and fathers'.⁸⁵ Here the joke is at Hypatia's expense too, her comments often revealing an attraction to rank, as well as a lack of understanding of the military. For instance, she writes 'A soldier here has told me that "C.B." stands for "conspicuous bravery". Is this true darling?'⁸⁶ (In reality, 'C.B.' stood for 'confinement to barracks', a form of punishment). As this jest suggests, the trench-newspaper texts have an in-joke quality, a sense that their writers and primary readers knew what military life was really like. The self-deprecation they involve indicates pleasure in being part of a club, of a group privileged with the knowledge of soldiers' true feelings and identities, the members of which could see through and satirise romanticised depictions of conflict.

Such humorous perspectives on aggrandising images of the war present a different kind of contestation from the condemnation of the 'old lie' associated with the most famous war poetry: in trench newspapers, challenges to heroic stereotypes are less a matter of questioning the worth of the war

⁸⁰ A. Muir, 'The Khaki Bags', *Salut Poilu*, April 1916, pp. 39–40.

⁸¹ X., 'Attacked by a Submarine', *Gambardier*, April 1915, p. 21; 'An Unexpected Visit, or Caught Bending', *Kinglet*, September 1917, pp. 12–13 (p. 12).

⁸² Meyer, *Men of War*, p. 5.

⁸³ Lois S. Bibbings, *Telling Tales About Men: Conceptions of Conscientious Objectors to Military Service During the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), pp. 90–91.

⁸⁴ Meyer, *Men of War*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Meyer, *Men of War*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ 'Horace to Hypatia', *Growler*, February 1915, pp. 4–5 (p. 4).

than of putting forward another kind of martial ideal. This other ideal is the identity of the amused serviceman who treats mishaps, discomforts, and disappointments with detachment, with light-hearted stoicism.⁸⁷ By representing soldiers as amusingly bumbling and hapless – and this includes the Chaplinesque soldiers discussed in the previous section – trench journalists show their capacity for jollity and self-mockery, in doing so embodying a stereotype according to which British servicemen adopted an advantageously humorous outlook on their war experience. Expressions of such an attitude sometimes appeared quite explicitly in trench-journal editorials. These include encouragement in the *Very Light* of March 1917 to ‘Remember you have a wonderful advantage over Fritz. He hasn’t any sense of humour. You have’, and appeals to ‘keep smiling’ in the March 1916 edition of the *Whizz-Bang*: ‘it is a smile that bodes no good to the Hun. It is the smile that is more terrifying than wrath, more deadly than rebuke’.⁸⁸ Such claims mirrored perspectives that appeared in professionally-run newspapers and magazines. The *Strand Magazine* (*Strand*) in 1918 praised British soldiers for their fortitude, portraying them as being in possession of ‘good humour and nonchalant determination’.⁸⁹ Similar assessments were in fact made with reference to trench newspapers themselves. A November 1916 feature also in the *Strand* celebrated the ‘proverbial’ humour that British servicemen and the soldiers of British Allies displayed in their periodicals, of which type of publication the writer claims to have discovered ‘no trace’ amongst the German forces (in fact, German servicemen did also create humorous magazines).⁹⁰ The *Manchester Guardian* in January 1916, meanwhile, printed the claim that ‘No better evidence can be found of our army’s unquenchable spirit than these clay-stained flimsies’.⁹¹ Though the trench press at times mocked some of the views on the war expressed in the mainstream press, the ideal of soldierly humorousness seems to have had the capacity to bridge martial and professional publications. As has been seen, examples of machine-age comedy often give rise to questions of the relationship between humour and subversion, belonging to the culture of mass entertainment that Benjamin identifies as both part of and protesting against modern mechanisation. The patriotic aspect of trench-newspaper humour suggests they encouraged, or at least chimed with, behaviour that was privileged in British wartime society, rather than being rebellious.

In addition to their shared roles in cultural mobilisation, trench newspapers and the professional press were connected in the sense that the humorous letters and diaries in trench newspapers mimicked those that appeared before the war in mainstream comic magazines. At one point Hypatia mentions reading “‘Phrynette’s” sweet letters’ to lonely soldiers in the illustrated newspaper the *Sketch*, a comment that hints at a practice common to many trench journals: the adaptation of peacetime comedy

⁸⁷ Adopting a self-deprecating voice was also very common amongst editors. Examples are far too many to cite in full, but to give just one, an editorial in the *Fusilier Whisperer* is described as, ‘that part of the paper in which the editor can dilate at length on his own merits and just complaints without the slightest fear of anyone reading it’. ‘Editorial’, *Fusilier Whisperer*, 26 June 1915 p. 1.

⁸⁸ ‘Editorial’, *Very Light*, March 1917, p. 2; ‘Keep Smiling’, *Whizz-Bang*, March 1916.

⁸⁹ Adrian Margaux, ‘The Humour of Bert Thomas’, *The Strand Magazine*, 55 (1918), 597–301 (p. 301).

⁹⁰ ‘Papers of the Firing Line’, *Strand*, 52 (1916), 558–62 (p. 558).

⁹¹ ‘Trench Papers’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 January 1916, p. 12.

to the wartime context.⁹² Phrynette was a funny and frivolous character, similar to Hypatia herself. She was the creation of Marthe Trolly-Curtin and had appeared in novels in 1911 and 1912.⁹³ As Hypatia's remark indicates, during the war Phrynette turned in the *Sketch* to corresponding with servicemen at the front who needed a pen-pal, analogously to Hypatia's own letters to Horace.⁹⁴ Similarly, the trench-newspaper comic diaries continue a trend for this style of humorous autobiography that was established decades before the outbreak of the conflict. Multiple nineteenth-century spoofs emerged in response to a publishing fad for (straight) life writing. This was, for example, the context for George and Weedon Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody*, originally serialised in *Punch* (1888–89), which gave rise to such texts as 'Diary of a Somebody' (1900), and which was accompanied by other Victorian examples of mock diaries, such as 'Extracts from the Diary of a Dyspeptic' (1889) and 'Diary of a Pessimist' (1888).⁹⁵ Later examples, some with a military setting, include 'From a Bachelor Uncle's Diary' (1900), 'Diary of a "Peace" Orator' (1900), 'Diary on Board a Submariner (Prophetic and Probable)' (1901), 'Leaves from an Aeronaut's Diary' (1901), 'A Leaf from a German Officer's Diary' (1910), 'Cinderella's Diary' (1910), 'The Diary of a Diplomatist' (1912), and 'Pages from the Diary of a Fly' (1913).⁹⁶ The professionally-produced comic periodicals in which these kinds of texts appeared – my examples are taken from *Punch* – are not only part of the development of popular, mass comedy that North identifies with machine-age humour, and part of the culture of technological reproducibility in which Benjamin is interested in more broadly, but also have a quality of machine-age humour in the repetitiveness of their jokes.⁹⁷ In the case of the diary parodies especially, a single format of humorous text is repeatedly used in the same publication across a period that stretches over a decade (similarly to the practice of editors re-reprinting identical cartoons with different captions).⁹⁸ The humour in periodicals printed before 1914 thus had a reproduced quality that continued into trench newspapers.

Less concrete, but still discernible, connections are found between trench-newspaper texts and already established comic techniques at the level of narrative style and of characterisation. Several of the narrators mentioned above have the quality of what John Batts identifies as 'American humor', a type of comic prose in which 'exaggerated narrative[s]' are told by a 'self-deprecating speaker in a

⁹² 'Horace to Hypatia', July 1916, pp. 5–10. 'Lonely soldier' correspondence was the term for pen-pal relationships between servicemen and women in Britain, with soldiers placing advertisements in papers to establish these connections.

⁹³ Marthe Trolly-Curtin, *Phrynette and London* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1911); Trolly-Curtin, *Phrynette Married* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1912).

⁹⁴ See, for example: Trolly-Curtin, 'Phrynette's Letters: "Because –"', *The Sketch*, 1 December 1915, p. 176.

⁹⁵ Arthur A'Beckett, 'Diary of a Somebody', *Punch*, 22 August 1900, p. 132; Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880–1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 57.

⁹⁶ 'From a Bachelor Uncle's Diary', *Punch*, 24 January 1900, p. 67; 'Diary of a "Peace" Orator', *Punch*, 28 March 1900, p. 220; Arthur A'Beckett, 'Diary on Board a Submariner', *Punch*, 23 January 1901, p. 64; St. John Hankin, 'Leaves from an Aeronaut's Diary', *Punch*, 16 October 1901, p. 278; A. T. Smith, 'A Leaf from a German Officer's Diary', *Punch*, 12 October 1910; Milne, 'Cinderella's Diary', *Punch*, 28 December 1910, p. 454; E. V. Lucas and C. L. Graves, 'The Diary of a Diplomatist', *Punch*, 26 June 1912; Walter Emanuel, 'Pages from the Diary of a Fly', *Punch*, 27 August 1913, p. 188. Some mock military diaries appeared in *Punch* during the conflict: Lt. J. B. Naismith, 'Field Kit Allowance', *Punch*, 2 June 1915, p. 434; Frank Elias, 'How War Is "Made in Germany"', *Punch*, 19 August 1914, p. 163.

⁹⁷ North, p. 8.

⁹⁸ Walker.

colourful, slangy idiom, with an emphasis on whimsical ways of looking at otherwise serious experiences'; this is generally a 'silly-billy narrator determined to appear engagingly dim-witted'.⁹⁹ Batts gives Jerome K. Jerome's work as an example, and with this reference point in mind the resemblance to some of the trench-newspaper characters above becomes clearer. The officer who misplaces his trousers in particular bears a strong resemblance to the kind of narrator Batts describes, his predicament having the ridiculous quality similar to the comic situations found in Jerome's most famous work, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889).¹⁰⁰ Another context for these trench-newspaper figures is the character type known as a knut.¹⁰¹ This was an 'irresponsible young man-about-town who gets into comic difficulties', who featured in the 'late nineteenth-century music hall' and in *Punch*, as well as in the theatre and prose fiction.¹⁰² Well-known examples include Algernon Moncrieff in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster, the latter of whom appeared mostly after 1918, but who initially surfaced in 1915.¹⁰³ Wodehouse explained in September 1914 that 'knut' was thought of as the 'proper term for the young man cutting a swathe through [London's] midst on his father's money'; he is 'bored to death, but he does it simply because it's done'.¹⁰⁴ Non-combatant knuts could attract censure during the war, as in a 1915 cartoon showing two smartly dressed men, labelled '1st knut' and '2nd knut', complaining about rain: the latter suggests 'These weathah conditions give one a vewy vivid ideah of life in the twenches!'¹⁰⁵ In E. V. Lucas' *The Vermilion Box* (1916), there is a moment in which knuts are discussed as incongruous to the wartime context: an older character remarks of a younger civilian whom he calls a knut, 'He must be almost the last of the tribe, but here he is, just as knutty as though the Algies and Berties were still ruling the roast, and not Mars at all'.¹⁰⁶ It seems that volunteering for military service could diminish young men's status as knuts, that enlistment was contrary to the knut identity. Two servicemen in a 1917 *Punch* cartoon are depicted eagerly eating an army meal of bread and tea or water while sitting on boxes, and are referred to as 'ex-Knut[s]', while the editors of the *RAMC Depot Magazine* in 1916 expressed the view that 'If compulsion [conscription] serves no other purpose, it will at least transform many of the "Knut" species into something of a more manly variety'.¹⁰⁷ Such a conversion was praised in one serviceman's rewritten version of the pre-war music-hall song 'Gilbert the Filbert'. The updated song included such lines as

⁹⁹ Batts associates American Humor with Mark Twain's work and its influence. John Batts, 'American Humor: The Mark of Twain on Jerome K. Jerome', in *The Victorian Comic Spirit*, ed. by Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), pp. 91–113 (pp. 92–93).

¹⁰⁰ Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) (London, Penguin, 2004).

¹⁰¹ 'The swell', another dashing, dandy-like figure is referred to in 1918 as 'ancestor of the "knut"' (C. L. Graves, 'The Sexagenarian to His Niece', *Punch*, 14 August 1918, p. 107), while a mock 'For Sale' notice in *Punch* gives an insight into the stylishness of these figures: entitled 'The Knut Settles Down', it advertises 'Pair of Spats, Bowler Hat, Silver-mounted Stick' ('The Knut Settles Down', *Punch*, 5 November 1924, p. 517).

¹⁰² Lawrence Dugan, 'Worcestershirewards: Wodehouse and the Baroque', *Connotations*, 20 (2011), 228–47 (p. 230).

¹⁰³ Dugan, p. 230.

¹⁰⁴ P. G. Wodehouse, 'The Knuts O'London', *Vanity Fair*, September 1914, p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ 'Waining Again', *Punch*, 24 February 1915, p. 146.

¹⁰⁶ Lucas, *The Vermilion Box* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1916), p. 77.

¹⁰⁷ D. L. Ghilchik, 'First Ex-Knut', *Punch*, 1 August 1917, p. 67; 'Editorial Notes', *RAMC Depot Magazine*, June 1916, p. 2.

‘You would know him in the old days by his smooth and well-oiled locks’, but ‘Now he’s fighting’ and ‘There’s a cheer and a “God bless you!” for the man we call the “K-nut”’.¹⁰⁸ The best examples of knuts in the texts discussed above are the officer who has to see his commander just after an incapacitating lunch and, again, the trouserless soldier who used to see himself as being ‘as punctilious a sub [subaltern – a junior officer] as ever strolled [down] Piccadilly’.¹⁰⁹ The amusingly un-heroic servicemen that featured regularly in trench newspapers do, however, have knut-like elements – their light-heartedness, and bumbling qualities – inheriting traits from this existing, often humorous, character type.

Clownish and knut-like characters appeared in the wartime context as amusingly disruptive, inept, and accident-prone, just as they had been presented before the conflict. The kind of comic heroes popular before the outbreak of the war were sufficiently durable to be included in servicemen’s own, self-made entertainment and, moreover, robust enough to be put to use in the representation of the war. Indeed, as with machine-age comedy more broadly – the kind of mass, mechanised entertainment that Benjamin identifies – the character types of the knut and of the bombastic narrators associated with American humour were durable because of their reproduced, reproducible quality: servicemen seem to have enjoyed returning to and rewriting the same kinds of characters. To borrow Bergson’s framework, individual, imperfect soldiers contrast the rigid ideals of martial composure, competency, and dutifulness that were expressed both before and during the conflict. Contributors to trench newspapers, with a self-deprecating, in-joke style, portray themselves not as dashing heroic, but as eccentric and bungling. By presenting such an amused outlook, these writers reflect another ideal of martial identity, corresponding to and propagating an image of servicemen as maintaining stoical amusement in response to their conflict experience.

2.3 ‘Are you there?’ Comic Entanglement with Military Communications.

In the texts considered below, communications – in the form of orders, signalling, and telephone conversations – become the focus of comic entanglements between servicemen and military bureaucracy and technology. They are further examples of how well-established comic production endured into the war years, being adapted to the depiction of the conflict. Humorous telephone exchanges and mishaps had been appearing in *Punch* for at least a decade before 1914, and there are some instances of jokes about military regulation and signalling printed before the Great War too. Once again, furthermore, the trench-newspaper echoes of such earlier humour see servicemen represent themselves as clownish, alongside a sense of official order and hierarchy being disrupted. Trench journals show forms of communication that are intended to be regulated, well organised, and efficient becoming instead associated with misrule. The texts include a degree of satire and, in the case of the parodies of orders, rewriting of a form of communication designed to control and regulate. In Bergsonian terms, the texts’ humour in this regard works as a corrective, highlighting and criticising that which is inelastic. Or, to

¹⁰⁸ Laura Ugolini, *Men and Menswear: Sartorial Consumption in Britain 1880–1939* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 72–73.

¹⁰⁹ Muir, p. 40.

return to Benjamin's framework, we once again see machine-age humour being used in a rebellion against mechanisation. With regard to those texts about the trials of telephoning, in fact, the humorous interaction is literally with a machine: servicemen 'embrace[d] an aspect of modern experience, the way that so much of it seemed to be mechanically organised', doing so in part to react against the mechanical.¹¹⁰ Even so, the works discussed are more safe than they are subversive. Bergson's position was that humour corrects in the service of maintaining a healthy society – laughter as a 'social gesture' 'does not belong to the province of aesthetics alone, since unconsciously [...] it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement'; Bergsonian humour is directed against the individual who is singled out as behaving in an inflexible way.¹¹¹ The society served by trench newspapers is military and it is the needs of the military that are ultimately upheld.

Parodies of orders were regular features in trench newspapers, their humour stemming from contrasts with the usual formality and solemnity of such documents, as well as from satire of perceived absurdities in real orders. For example, the *Lines of Fire* of July 1918 included instructions for how a unit of men, referred to by number, should build a dug-out, featuring such lines as: No. 1 is 'responsible that the Grace of God is not the only visible means of support of the Dug-out' and should 'see that all numbers appear to be well employed, though no actual work is being done'. Nos. 2 and 3 'are responsible that no intrusion is made by enquiring officers'; No. 4 is 'responsible for the distribution of sandbags, taking care that the proportion of bottomless sandbags is everywhere maintained'. Other men have such duties as seeing that 'no men are outside when the Dug-out collapses', while 'Skilled carpenters', must 'lean against the Dug-out [...] to prevent it from collapsing'.¹¹² The *Mudhook* of September 1917, in a similar vein, provides instructions regarding an order that 'subsequent to a gas attack, clothes are to be taken off and beaten before the gas mask is removed'.¹¹³ Carpet beaters, readers are told, 'are not to be regarded as weapons of offence' and are not 'to take the place of rifle and bayonet'; clothes should be hung on a line so that 'cover from view will be obtained whilst the flagellation of the clothes is in progress', and, should an attack occur while the men are beating their clothes, they should 'pursue without delay [...] the imposing appearance presented [...] will attain the desired end' (figure 14).¹¹⁴ The September 1918 edition of *Lines of Fire*, meanwhile, included orders for 'An enemy nest (wasp)' to be 'blocked and put out of action' (featuring guidance on protecting 'Strawberry Jam and Marmalade, Pêche Melba and Bread and Butter Pudding').¹¹⁵ The August 1916 *Behind the Lines* presented orders for action in the event of a fire, which revolved around rescuing the best food and all that was necessary for recreation: 'remove all the beer, tins of salmon, biscuits, stewed fruits, packs of cards, cigarettes';

¹¹⁰ North, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Bergson, p. 20.

¹¹² W., 'Dug-Out Drill', *Lines of Fire*, July 1918, pp. 26–27.

¹¹³ This may have been based on real advice. Brigadier General James Harbord instructed that 'When a man is close to the burst of a gas shell his clothes may become contaminated [...] When possible the clothes will be removed'. James Harbord, *Defensive Measures Against Gas Attacks* (France: Headquarters American Expeditionary Force, 1917), p. 10.

¹¹⁴ 'Gas And – Clothes', *Mudhook*, 1 September 1917.

¹¹⁵ Captain O. B. E. Wangler, 'Operation Orders', *Lines of Fire*, September 1918, pp. 20–21.

rescue ‘2 Footballs, 1 Rugby Ball, the complete Cricket outfit’; should the ‘Bully-Beef’ be threatened, officers must ‘take the necessary steps to keep the fire burning’.¹¹⁶ The Christmas 1914 edition of the *Gambardier* offered instructions for festivities (‘staggerers who are not drunk by 10 p.m. will parade on the flag halyards for inspection by the Assistant Adjutant-General Boozer’), and in May 1916 the editors of the *Buzzer* printed comically absurd orders, examples of which include: ‘All submarines found must be handed in to the Quartermaster’s Stores’; ‘Anyone turning out on parade rusty will be handcuffed to a ghost’.¹¹⁷

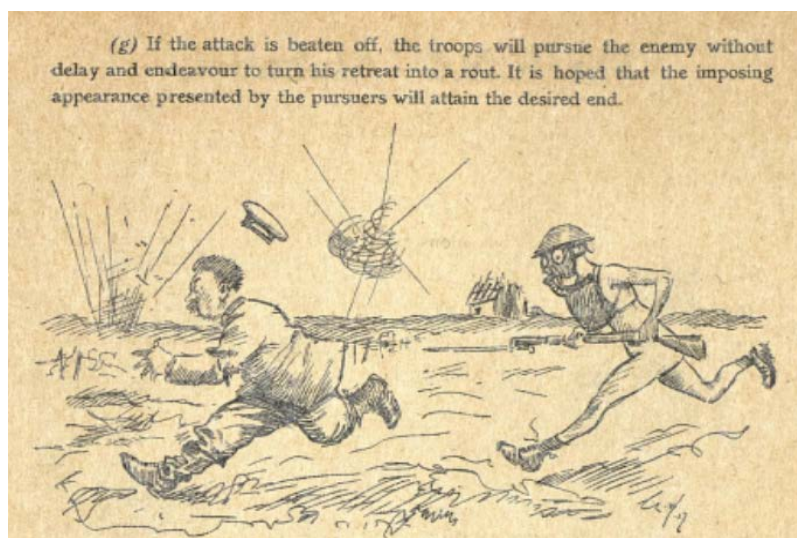


Figure 14: ‘Gas And – Clothes’, *The Mudhook*, 1 September 1917.

Servicemen-parodists in each of the examples given have, in Bergsonian style, taken a rigid, mechanical form of text – orders – a kind of text associated with regulation and uniformity, and have introduced to them human fallibility and individuality. Once again, the image of soldiers created is not one that matches the military, masculine ideals described in the previous section with reference to Meyer’s and Bibbings’ research. The orders highlight things that are important, and these are not discipline, honour, and duty, but food, entertainment, alcohol, and avoiding work. They rework top-down communications that are meant to enforce discipline and order, encouraging and/or describing exactly the opposite behaviour: getting drunk in the carnival atmosphere of Christmas festivities, working in a way that means the activity carried out is haphazard and requires as little effort as possible, and rescuing from fire only those items related to comfort and pleasure. The parodies in addition depict orders as extending to bizarrely over-regulated lengths; this is especially true of the *Mudhook* text, which, for example, includes instructions on the order in which to remove clothes and the desired method of beating them (‘the beater, which will be held in the right hand, will be raised to a perpendicular position [...]’), as well as the *Lines of Fire* parody, the joke in this work being that the removal of a wasps’ nest is planned

¹¹⁶ T. Bennicke, ‘“Some” Orders for “Some” Fire-Party’, *Behind the Lines: The (Unofficial) Magazine of No. 10 Stationary Hospital, British Expeditionary Force*, August 1916.

¹¹⁷ Pecked Parsnips, ‘Company Orders’, *Gambardier*, December 1914, p. 10; J. Harkaway, ‘Battalion Orders by Colonel Dooly Dooly’, *Buzzer*, May 1916, p. 10.

with needless military formality. The parody in the *Buzzer* in particular, meanwhile, characterises orders as ridiculous; not dissimilarly from the poems discussed in the previous chapter, this text challenges the reason, encouraging Kantian oscillation of the mind as readers attempt to make sense of a military world in which rationality does not apply.

The satirical element to these rewritings creates tension between the subversive and the safe. This is the tension I discuss in the final chapter of this thesis, in which I demonstrate how humour in the theatre held in balance that which was inflammatory and that which was innocuous, and the comedy in the parodies of orders has a similar effect. Though they mock a key aspect of military discipline, criticising it, in Bergsonian terms, for being over-regulated and overly-mechanical, the humour with which they do so prevents them from being examples of, or encouraging, serious rebellion. Indeed, as much as it is possible to judge, these parodies appear to be on the ‘innocuous’ side of the equation. As a whole, they are imbued with self-deprecation and a sense of in-joking; they are light-hearted in tone and often focus on humorous discrepancy between what men are ordered to do and how they behave in reality – in this respect they are amusingly exaggerated depictions of ‘shirking’ rather than actual inducement to flout instructions. Expressing impressions of overregulation and absurdity in relation to official orders could even be seen as likely to encourage servicemen to accommodate themselves to such rules and instructions, with soldiers mocking rather than disobeying them. Moreover, they again put forward the idealised identity of the humorous serviceman, an identity associated with patriotic participation in the conflict rather than rebellion against British war efforts.

Texts addressing the use of signalling and telephones include similarly light-hearted depictions of military communication going wrong. Signalling especially would likely be a novel form of interaction for those who were not professional servicemen (as were military orders), and this newness adds to the humour of an account of a training exercise, entitled ‘A Signal Success: a Comedy of Flagging Interest’, that appeared in the *Growler* in October 1915. It is a short sketch based on a real incident in which a captain with the battalion was ‘lost with a squad of grinning signallers’ and ‘mistook a shirt on a line for a hostile flag-wagger’.¹¹⁸ The newspaper was edited by a corporal, Ben Carr, and the text includes a degree of good-humoured delight in the officer’s error; in particular, a signaller corrects his superior with dry politeness worthy of Wodehouse’s Jeeves.¹¹⁹ ‘[F]ollowed eagerly by five bright-eyed and enthusiastic signallers’, the officer mistakes innocuous objects for messages, and even other troops. He asks the signallers that accompany him who they are three times before grasping what their occupation is, going on to have such exchanges as:

OFFICER – [...] Here you signallers! What is that man with the flag saying to us?

SIGNALLER – It’s a white shirt flying from a clothes line, sir.

[...]

¹¹⁸ Cooke, p. 192.

¹¹⁹ Cooke, p. 192.

OFFICER – Look! a man with a lamp is signalling to us.

SIGNALLER – That’s a light in a cottage window, sir.

The officer goes on to order a man forward ‘to see who the troops in the next field are’, the scout returning with the information that ‘the troops are sheep in close formation’. In the end, the officer admits that ‘We are as effectively lost as it’s possible to be’, and he and the signallers exit ‘severally’.¹²⁰

References to servicemen using telephones are given equally comic treatment. One brief instance occurs in what are ironically described as the ‘lucid instructions’ for dealing with fire that were published in the *Hangar Herald* of February 1915, another example of orders being parodied. The picquet officer should ‘attempt to locate the telephone, which is at the other end of the Hangar, embedded in the centre of a haystack’, and ‘At the word of command “tele-PHONE”, the N.C.O. or an intelligent private will advance three paces and ring up the Exchange pronouncing clearly the words “are you there?”’¹²¹ Elsewhere in the trench press there are lengthier representations of humorous incidents involving telephones. These include ‘Five Minutes With a Field Telephone’, which appeared in the *Whizz-Bang* in January 1916. It is set in the trenches, ‘Anywhere in France’, between ‘2 a.m. and 2 p.m. every day’, and is based on crossed wires and miscommunication:

Fourth Voice (Brigadier-General): “I want the battery”.

Third Voice (singing): “I want to be –”

Buzzer: Umpty – iddy umpty – iddy.

Second Voice: “Get off the line!”

Fifth Voice: “I say, dry up, this is the O.C. P Coy [Officer in Charge, P Company]. – jolly important!”

First Voice: “Is that you, Alfie? Can you hear Jock trying to sing ‘Dixie’!”¹²²

Comparable problems occur in ‘Telephonic Troubles’ (the *Dump*, December 1915) a text supposedly made up of transcripts of what linesmen overhear on military telephones. Reflecting the generic setting of the text above (‘anywhere in France’, ‘every day’), the linesmen are presented as everyman characters: ‘There isn’t any need to tell you their names because you all know them; they belong to your brigade or battalion or company or battery’.¹²³ A typical exchange reads:

“Get off the line, can’t you?”

¹²⁰ ‘A Signal Success: A Comedy of Flagging Interest’, *Growler*, October 1915, p. 8.

¹²¹ The Outsidelopedia, ‘Our Letter Box’, *Hangar Herald*, 1 February 1915. This phrase seems to have been a stereotypical one associated with telephone conversation. For instance, a 1914 *Punch* cartoon showed a ‘Territorial Sentry [by profession a telephone operator]’ asking ‘Are you there?’ (Leonard Raven-Hill, ‘Territorial Sentry’, *Cartoon, Punch*, 23 September 1914, p. 257).

¹²² H. M., ‘Five Minutes With a Field Telephone’, *Whizz-Bang*, January 1916, p. 5.

¹²³ ‘Telephonic Troubles: Things the Linesman Overhears’, *Dump*, December 1915, p. 12.

“Get off it yourself. Whose line do you think you’re on?”

“This is our direct line to WW”.

“I tell you it is my wire to KQ”.

“It can’t be, you ass!”

“Here, not so much of it! I tell you the wire’s labelled ‘KQ’ on my compytater [sic]”.

“Your compytater! You mean your complicator”.¹²⁴

Other conversations include servicemen repeatedly shouting ‘Hello!’ at each other, asking if the line is ‘OK’, criticising each other for not knowing what ‘OK’ means, complaining about callers not identifying themselves, discussing buzzing noises, and being interrupted by senior officers telling them not to use the line for personal conversations.¹²⁵ Elsewhere, a German officer is said to have invented ‘a new machine for tapping our trench telephones’, but is not rewarded as he expected, instead overhearing such comments as ‘it’ll be all the same après la guerre, nayce pas, Bill. ’Ullo! ’Ullo! I say, Bill, did I tell you about that girl in my billet?’¹²⁶ As with the parodies of orders, the tensions between that which is regulated and that which is erratic and eccentric create a Bergsonian structure. The techniques of machine-age humour once again contribute to the depiction of a clash between the mechanical and the human in military experience. Signalling and telephoning, meant to ease the exchange of information, are depicted here as causing farcical chaos instead. Contributors to trench newspapers, reflecting the process that Benjamin describes in his exploration of mass entertainment, take revenge against the mechanical.¹²⁷

The comic techniques used to represent military communication are anticipated in the pre-war humour of *Punch*. The humorous representation of military orders and signalling seems not to have had as strong a peacetime model as those texts dealing with telephones – the clearest pre-war precedent for trench-newspaper mock orders is the popularity of parody in periodicals and music hall – yet there are nevertheless a few instances of earlier lampoons of military administration.¹²⁸ Two examples appeared in 1902 and 1903; these are large cartoons showing different, comic scenes involving military personnel next to short extracts from orders. For instance, an instruction that Officers and N.C.O.s should be trained to deal with ‘positions requiring prompt action & ready resource’ is accompanied by an illustration of a serviceman running from a bull.¹²⁹ An example of signalling gone comically wrong, furthermore, appeared in 1904 in response to a report that ‘Apparently disjointed and meaningless messages’ were received at Portsmouth wireless stations, giving the impression that ‘Russian ships’

¹²⁴ ‘Telephonic Troubles’, p. 12.

¹²⁵ ‘Telephonic Troubles’, pp. 12–13. The term originated in the U.S. in the mid-nineteenth century (‘OK, Adj., int.1, n.2, and Adv.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 2017 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/258326> [accessed 23 August 2017]).

¹²⁶ Pip-Toc, ‘Trench Telephony’, *Periscope*, November 1916, pp. 5–6 (p. 5).

¹²⁷ Benjamin, ‘Work of Art’, p. 111.

¹²⁸ Some parodies of orders by a servicemen appeared in *Punch* in August 1918, again suggesting a close relationship between the trench and professional press. Captain T. P. C. Wilson, ‘If The Worm Turned’, *Punch*, 21 August 1918, p. 125.

¹²⁹ Charles L. Pott, ‘Army Orders’, *Punch*, 15 January 1902, p. 51; Charles L. Pott and *Daily Telegraph*, ‘What Preliminary Orders for Autumn Maneuvres May Come To’, *Punch*, 16 September 1903, p. 187.

were ‘off the Isle of Wight signalling energetically to one another’.¹³⁰ The context for this latter joke was the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), while the comic orders were printed during the Boer War (1899–1902). These texts are glimpses of how conflicts before 1914 were treated with humour in ways that anticipate Great War comedy, another strand of continuity in humorous representation. Far more common before the First World War, though, were texts dealing with difficulties with telephones, generally involving the same kinds of crossed wires and misuses as those reported in trench newspapers: humorous confusion caused by telephones had become a frequent feature of comic periodicals by 1914. These include ‘Telephone Triolets’ (1905) (‘What’s that? Your Aunt Jane – | Great Scott! What a row | In the ‘phone’); ‘Temporary Insanity’ (1910), featuring such lines as “‘Are you there?’” | “‘Yes” | “‘Where?’””; ‘Pamela at the Telephone’ (1912) – Pamela, when misconnected, will ‘stand for hours misleading the people the other end, pretending to take their orders [...], accepting invitations to dinner [...], inventing bulletins from invalids to anxious enquirers’; ‘And Then There Was None’ (1913), a poem in which the only person in London to be satisfied with his telephone service changes his opinion; ‘More Telephone Troubles’ (1913), which is a cartoon captioned “‘Ye can’t hear what I’m sayin’? Well then, repeat what ye didn’t hear an’ I’ll tell it ye again’”; and, finally, ‘The Trials of the Telephone’ (1900), ‘Through the Wires’ (1901), and ‘The Telephone Again’ (March 1914), which once more involve crossed wires, poor connections, and miscommunications with the operator.¹³¹ Culture in the machine-age often relies on repetition, as North explains, and telephones especially were a stock comic prop before the outbreak of the conflict, priming their wartime counterparts to be equally humorous objects.

These texts based on military communication are further examples of trench newspapers echoing some well-established jokes, reflecting the reproducible quality of machine-age comedy that is North’s focus in particular. This is true of the telephone texts especially, these appearing to draw their humour partly from an expectation that something will go wrong when using the technology.¹³² Unsurprisingly, given the more specifically military nature of the communication they address, the trench-newspaper texts dealing with signalling and orders are not as clearly related to earlier comic writing. Even so, the humour in these wartime texts is based on the same sort of comic miscommunication that is found in pre-1914 telephone sketches. Trench-newspaper portrayals of military communication indicate the durability of existing styles of humour for responding to war experience. Similarly to the way in which Chaplinesque humour, American humour, and knut-like characters had a reproducibility that facilitated their adaptation to the war, jokes about difficulties of

¹³⁰ Thomas Anstey Guthrie and *The Daily Chronicle*, ‘Energetic Signalling’, *Punch*, 2 November 1904, p. 319.

¹³¹ G. K. Menzies, ‘Telephone Triolets’, *Punch*, 22 November 1905, p. 376; Dornford Yates, ‘Temporary Insanity’, *Punch*, 25 May 1910, p. 392; Mrs Marillier, ‘Pamela at the Telephone’, *Punch*, 24 July 1912, p. 86; Gilbert Collins, ‘And Then There Was None’, *Punch*, 24 September 1913, p. 266; Raven-Hill, ‘More Telephonic Troubles’, *Punch*, 8 October 1913, p. 311; Hawkin, ‘The Trials of the Telephone’, *Punch*, 17 October 1900, p. 276; Arthur A’Beckett, ‘Through the Wires’, *Punch*, 6 March 1901, p. 184; C. K. Phillips, ‘The Telephone Again’, *Punch*, 4 March 1914, p. 175.

¹³² Such an expectation is played out in a short *Punch* anecdote of 1911, in which the narrator spends time explaining the telephone to his pupil, a Territorial Sapper, only to discover that the student is a professional telephone operator in civilian life. Arthur A’Beckett, ‘The Learner’, *Punch*, 29 November 1911, p. 402.

communication could be rewritten and recreated such that they became relevant to the military context and its representation. They evoke a different picture of life in the armed forces from that which might be suggested by official forms of communication themselves. Whereas signals, orders, and telephones were in their proper capacity designed for efficiency, associated with strict protocol, and part of a regulating bureaucracy, in further examples of Bergsonian incongruities, they become in trench newspapers means of depicting unruliness, eccentricity, and error. There is a satirical element to such representation, trench-newspaper humour reacting against mechanisation in the way that Benjamin observes in mass entertainment in the period more widely. However, the humorous representation of military communications once more promotes the idealised image of servicemen as amused by the everyday trials of their war experience. Kinds of machine-age humour popular before the conflict thus emerge in trench newspapers in complex ways, contributing to satire of the military machine, but also to the expression of senses of identity presented elsewhere as war-winning.

2.4 ‘I ain’t no bloomin Kipling’: Parody and Music Hall.¹³³

The mock orders, like the diaries above, are one component of what is a prominent feature of trench newspapers: parody. Source texts were not confined to any particular genre, author, form, or style: contributors wrote spoofs of popular songs, of ancient or religious texts, of academic ‘natural history’ articles, of war reportage from the press in Britain, and of specific literary texts by well-known writers. Ubiquitous in trench newspapers, parody was similarly commonplace in music hall and in those comic papers the trench press imitated, a double iteration (repetition of the source text and of a staple of comic publishing) taking place whenever a parody was published in the genre. Humour emerges in these texts from Bergsonian tensions between the original – the rigid textual framework – and the parodies’ ‘organic’ diversions, as well as from the machine-age reproducibility at the heart of the culture Benjamin and North explore, from the ways in which writers both embrace and rebel against mechanical reproduction when they repeat and alter their source texts. The interplay between the original and parody texts is often to do with presenting connections and differences between peacetime and wartime, and between the lives of those in service and those at home. This again includes the representation of servicemen as being cheerfully hapless, and the depiction of the war zone as comically absurd. The parodies were more affectionate than mocking – they suggest that the source texts were well-liked, providing welcome familiarity and connections to home culture – but also at points indicate the gaps between life in service and civilian life. The picture of war experience these tensions create is illuminated below via discussion of an example text, the *Growler*’s ‘Will We – Mind?’ (1915), selected because it helps to elucidate the importance of music hall to trench newspapers as well as that of parody, and because of the complexities in its portrayal of war experience: it touches on the discomforts and anxieties about military service, on soldiers’ relationships with those at home, and on the idea that such

¹³³ ‘Thoughts’, *B.E.F. Times*, 22 January 1918, in Westthorp, *Wipers Times*, p. 273.

subjects could be stoically disregarded.¹³⁴ First, though, some suggestions as to the huge number and variety of parodies that appeared in trench newspapers.

There were several authors and texts that were particularly popular targets for parody in the journals. These include *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, Samuel Pepys' diary, Kipling's work (especially 'If'), Shakespeare (a good example is a 'Sentry's Soliloquy' from the *Periscope* – 'Is this a ruddy Boche I see before me, | Just by yon corpse in No Man's Land? | Come, let me strafe thee'), and Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855).¹³⁵ A lengthy imitation of this last work by Owen Rutter, later a successful writer and historian, was even published in book form in 1920, having originally been serialised in the *Balkan News*, which paper served soldiers on the Macedonian Front and which was one of the most regular and long-lasting of the trench journals.¹³⁶ Also popular were mock answers to correspondents ('Troubled Tom. – We thoroughly appreciate your difficulties as the Commander of a mixed Company, but you really must keep the Waacs [Women's Army Auxiliary Corps] out of the way on Saturday afternoons'); adverts ('FAMOUS NERVE FOOD', 'Lieut. West writes: "I tried a bottle of your food and now only find it necessary to lie down for two hours each afternoon instead of four"'); and battalion news ('The Librarian Fusiliers were noticed to wind their puttees with two twists at the back [...] Warm approval has been expressed of this momentous and far-reaching scheme, the importance of which [...] cannot be exaggerated').¹³⁷ Spoof Sherlock Holmes stories also appeared, generally involving the detective solving mysteries in a military context. For example, in the 'Adventures of Lockholme Shears' (1916) the mystery is that men recalled from the front to work on munitions never arrive at the factory.¹³⁸ Elsewhere, war experience is given humorous treatment in parodies of biblical tales, including such descriptions as (in the *Lead-Swinger*) 'it came to pass that, after many days, the heavens opened and poured down their wrath', and (in the *Hobocob*) 'when the trumpeter did trump upon his trumpet then did all the young men [...] assemble with [...] their

¹³⁴ 'Will We – Mind?', *Growler*, February 1915, p. 10.

¹³⁵ 'The Sentry's Soliloquy', *Periscope*, November 1916, p. 6; Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha* (London: David Bogue, 1855). See, for example: 'The Rubaiyat of Omark I Am Fedup', *Hangar Herald*, 16 February 1915; 'The Song of the Reconnoitring Patrol', *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, July 1915; 'Poetry?', *Buzzer*, 30 November 1915, p. 2; 'The Rubaiyat of Ole Mark Hyam', *Whizz-Bang*, March 1916, p. 10; Fatigue, 'Higher Water, or a Picardy Romance', *Lead-Swinger*, 26 October 1916, pp. 287–88; 'Extracts from the "Britannia" Pepys', *Helm*, 1 August 1917; 'Postalatha', *Royal Engineers Postal Section*, December 1917, p. 29; 'Omar at the Front', *Mudhook*, 1 January 1918; Jujube, 'Hiawatha on the Modern Warpath', *Lines of Fire*, April 1918, pp. 8–10.

¹³⁶ Andrew Scragg, 'Reconsidering a "Neglected Classic" and Widening the Canon of World War I Poetry: The Song of Tiadatha'

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265725032_Reconsidering_a_Neglected_Classic_and_Widening_the_Canon_of_World_War_I_Poetry_The_Song_of_Tiadatha> [accessed 20 January 2016]; Shafquat Towheed, Francesca Benatti and Edmund King, 'Readers and Reading in the First World War', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 45 (2015), 239–61 (p. 257–58).

¹³⁷ 'Answers to Correspondents', *Kinglet*, December 1917, p. 9; 'Adverts', *Kinglet*, December 1917, p. 18; 'Battalion News', *Kinglet*, December 1917, p. 17.

¹³⁸ Honeydew, 'The Adventures of Lockholme Shears: No. 4 – The Adventure of the Eight Munitioneers', *Lead-Swinger*, 21 June 1916, pp. 212–18.

weapons'.¹³⁹ Mock academic accounts were also printed, purportedly written from the future, about the mysterious ancient inhabitants of the battlefields. Extracts from 'Professor Dug-Out's' work, for example, contained such notes as: 'there have been found long rows of cave-like dwellings situated along the banks of a depression which may have been at one time the bed of a river'.¹⁴⁰ Other trench-journal texts were parodic in a subtler sense, referencing well-known works without being obvious rewritings. For example, the *718 W.T. Company's Magazine* of September 1916 contained a poem called 'The Only Man', of which more below, that is not an exact imitation of S. T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), but which does strongly echo it to comic effect.¹⁴¹

These trench-newspaper texts were part of parody's wider popularity in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The professionally-produced humorous periodicals of this period often contained parodies of a range of works. Craig Howes notes that 'parodic verse on the issues of the day' was a 'constant' in these publications, with *Punch* 'producing an endless stream of such poetry', while Donald Gray draws attention to the 'innumerable parodies and burlesques published in magazines and comic papers'.¹⁴² Gray explains that the 'high seriousness' of Victorian verse invited comic writers 'to deflate the solemnity of conventional poetry'.¹⁴³ For example, in Victorian parody 'the exalted personages of well-known poems' were put to 'inappropriate tasks', such as 'the Ancient Mariner hail[ing] a cab'.¹⁴⁴ This point rings true of the trench-journal parodies that involve famous characters. Sherlock Holmes, as has been seen, is given ridiculous wartime work, and there are many wartime Hiawathas who struggle through modern military life. Both of these characters were popular subjects of parody and rewriting before the war: Holmes fans were encouraged to write their own stories about the detective – though these were a form of fanfiction rather than parody as such – and Longfellow's poem was quickly and extensively parodied.¹⁴⁵ Carroll wrote a spoof of this latter work (1857), prefacing it with the comment that 'I can claim no special merit for this slight attempt at doing what is known to be so easy', since 'Any fairly practised writer [...] could compose, for hours together', in the poem's 'easy running metre'. Carroll's version tells the tale of Hiawatha failing to take successful photographs: 'All the family in order | Sat before him for their pictures', each 'in turn, as he was taken, | Volunteered his

¹³⁹ Iodinus Castorius, 'The Journey of the Tribes', *Lead-Swinger*, 6 November 1915, pp. 28–29; 'The Book of Chronicles of the Cadetti', *Hobocob*, December 1917. Similar texts include: Ardy, 'The Northern Nomads', *Quaysider*, November 1914, p. 3; Esdras the Scribe, 'Chronicles of the Great War', *Dump*, December 1918, pp. 24–26.

¹⁴⁰ Bunthorne, 'Recent Discoveries in the Rhin [sic.] Valley', *Lead-Swinger*, 27 November 1915, pp. 17–19 (p. 18). See also: Revd. Dr. C. F. A. Cooper, 'Cage Denizens in Alcoholia', *Hangar Herald*, 15 April 1915, p. 3.

¹⁴¹ 'The Only Man', *718 W.T. Company's Magazine*, 1 September 1916, p. 5.

¹⁴² Craig Howes, 'Comic/Satiric Periodicals', in *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers*, ed. by Andrew King, Alexis Easley, and John Morton (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 318–27 (p. 325); Donald Gray, 'The Uses of Victorian Laughter', *Victorian Studies*, 10 (1966), 145–76 (p. 153–54).

¹⁴³ Gray, 'Victorian Comic Verse; Or, Snakes in Greenland', *Victorian Poetry*, 26 (1988), 211–30 (p. 213).

¹⁴⁴ Gray, 'Victorian Comic Verse', p. 214.

¹⁴⁵ Ann McClellan, 'Tit-Bits, New Journalism, and Early Sherlock Holmes Fandom', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 23 (2017), (paras 6.1–6.4); James Williams, 'The Jokes in the Machine: Comic Verse', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 817–833 (p. 820).

own suggestions, | His ingenious suggestions'.¹⁴⁶ Many other mock versions of it surfaced in periodicals ranging from *Punch* (''Tis a poem in this metre, | And embalming the traditions, | Fables, rites, and superstitions' [1856]), to school magazines, such as the *Tonbridgian* (1892).¹⁴⁷ The trench-press parodies of Sherlock Holmes stories give rise to impressions of the war zone as being absurd, not dissimilarly to the poems discussed previously. Holmes, famed for his logic and reason, when placed in the war zone engages in such behaviour as searching for a 'lost [mathematical] formula' (in *Lines of Fire*), discovering the 'source of wild rumours' in a training camp, and trying to solve the case of an officer who 'felt thirsty at two a.m'.¹⁴⁸ In the *Growler*, the Holmes character invents nonsensical aphorisms, conceals himself as 'a machine gun, a tuft of grass, and a frontage of three hundred yards', vanishes 'disguised as two days leave, on the back of a flash of lightning', and behaves so oddly that 'he was offered three stripes as a reward for his splendid initiative'.¹⁴⁹

More common, though, are parodies that undermine the idealised heroism of adventurous military masculinity. A good example is 'The Only Man', a narrative poem in which the speaker, looking 'pale and wan' tells the tale of being left 'the only man' not, as most of the poem leads the reader to believe, after a terrible battle, but the only man not to be made an N.C.O.¹⁵⁰ The irreverence shown in these trench-newspaper texts does not necessarily suggest a rejection of or antagonism towards serious Great War literature, or to the sources of the parodies. Elevated and exalting war poetry was sometimes shown appreciation in the journals, for example the editors of the *RAMC Depot Magazine* reprinted Brooke's 'The Soldier' in its entirety in the periodical's edition of 4 August 1916.¹⁵¹ Rather, trench newspapers offer, generally, a different point of view on military masculinity and military life from perspectives that are aggrandising and focused on feats of heroism. Parody before the war was employed for the comic disruption of seriousness and gravity, and continued to serve this function in trench newspapers.

Indeed, 'Will We – Mind?', a parody of Gertie Gitana's music-hall song 'Never Mind', provides a good case study of the ways in which parody contributes in trench newspapers to the humorous depiction of military experience. Printed in the February 1915 edition of the *Growler*, it may well have been written by the journal's editor who, as noted above, was Corporal Ben Carr, an actor in civilian

¹⁴⁶ Lewis Carroll, 'Hiawatha's Photographing' (1857), in *Phantasmagoria and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 66–77 (pp. 66, 68).

¹⁴⁷ Ann Wilsher, "'Hiawatha's Photographing": Lewis Carroll and A. B. Frost', *History of Photography*, 3 (1979), p. 304; 'The Song of Hiawatha: Author's Protective Edition', *Punch*, 12 January 1856, p. 17; A. D. Harvey, 'School Magazines', *The Contemporary Review*, 273 (1998), 35–40 (p. 38).

¹⁴⁸ Sir Arthur Gohan Boyle, 'Adventures of the Lost Formula', *Lines of Fire*, April 1918, pp. 2–3 (p. 2); 'The Sad Case of the Rumour Stricken Camp', *Growler*, July 1915, pp. 10–11. The latter mystery was a reference to an actual incident that took place at Catterick Camp, North Yorkshire. The rumour column of the same edition of the *Growler* in which this Holmes case appeared reported that officers held a 'celebration', but 'we were not there and we don't believe all we HEAR at 2 a.m. in the morning' ('Canvassed Catterick Camp Cackle: Censored Conscientiously', *Growler*, July 1915, pp. 2–3 [p. 3]).

¹⁴⁹ 'The Sad Case'.

¹⁵⁰ 'The Only Man'.

¹⁵¹ Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier', *RAMC Depot Magazine* (1914), 4 August 1916, p. 2.

life who composed much of the newspaper singlehandedly.¹⁵² The song's original lyrics are written from the point of view of a father comforting his daughter who has been jilted. The title appears as a refrain in the chorus: 'Though your heart may ache awhile, never mind | Though your face may lose its smile, never mind'.¹⁵³ The comedy in 'Will We – Mind?' emerges from the interplay between the source text and the parody's divergences from it, which interaction contributes to the evocation of a complex relationship between those in service and those remaining at home, as well as an ambivalent attitude towards the familiar, home-front world of the music hall. More generally, the parody articulates subjects of importance to new recruits: their own rawness, the discomforts of military life, and taboos and difficulties surrounding the expression of emotion and the contemplation of violence.

Will We – Mind?

With Apologies to Gertie Gitana.

When you're digging in the trenches – Never Mind,
And have left behind the wenches – Never Mind.
Just raise up your voice and sing
"It's the cutest little thing",
I'm a soldier of the King – Never Mind.

When the Germans come to Alnwick – Never Mind,
Don't go hairless in a panic – Never Mind.
If they send across a shell
Just raise up your voice and yell,
Get yourself away to — Well – Never mind.

When you're called up at 6.30 – Never mind,
With your face half clean, half dirty – Never mind.
You Northumb'land Fusiliers,
I am sending you three cheers –
Though you'd rather they were "Beers" – Never Mind.

If you're fed on bread and bread – Never Mind,
And you wish that you were dead – Never Mind,
You'll get home again – if lucky,
And so long as you've been plucky,

¹⁵² Cooke, p. 192.

¹⁵³ Kendall, *Poetry*, p. 294, n. 222.

We won't mind if you look "mucky" – WE won't mind.

Your People.

The battalion to which the *Growler* was attached had only been in existence for six months at the time of the text's publication and servicemen are captured, once again, as being outside the military ideal that Bibbings and Meyer identify, the impression being created of soldiers getting used to the conditions and identity associated with military life.¹⁵⁴ Tempted to panic, and only partially washed, these are servicemen who do not embody venerated, heroic soldierliness, while the references to a lack of 'wenches' and 'beer', to early starts and a poor diet, in addition hint at the unfamiliarity of military discipline and discomfort. The kind of 'grouses' the text contains are, as already touched on, a staple of the trench-newspaper genre, a kind of mild criticism based on common complaints. Their articulation here is a statement of belonging to the group of men who knew about the more mundane, day-to-day aspects of military life. Similarly, the refrain of 'Never mind' is a repeated assertion of the version of military identity according to which it involves stoical, amused, good-humoured acceptance of all circumstances. Trench newspapers helped to build senses of military and unit identity, and the picture of soldiers presented in this parody reflects this: it sketches experiences, and an attitude towards them, that mark the 'you' of the song – the recruits addressed – as servicemen.¹⁵⁵

The parody also hints at some darker aspects of war experience, expressed in blackly humorous terms.¹⁵⁶ The soldiers will return only 'if lucky', a starkly truthful acknowledgement, while the reference to 'hell' via an oblique rhyme in line ten is both an amusing substitute for a swear word and a suggestion of the extremities that military experience could reach. Matthew Bevis draws attention to a technique employed by Marie Lloyd, star of the halls, of 'sticking closely to the metrical structure of her songs even as she bent them to her will', leaning on particular phrases in order to 'bring out a double meaning', a way of creating innuendo that is reflected in 'Will We – Mind?' by the dash before the implied reference to 'hell'.¹⁵⁷ There is here a Bergsonian contrast between the form of the song on the one hand – a kind of 'mechanical inelasticity' – and Lloyd's delivery on the other, which is the more individualised, flexible aspect of her performance.¹⁵⁸ More implicitly, furthermore, there is some dark humour in the incongruity between the song's breezy refrain and its use as a generic response to a large number of eventualities. The war provides the context for imagining, with amusing incongruity, Alnwick being occupied, and the response recommended in the song is similarly incongruous in its

¹⁵⁴ Cooke, p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Pegum, p. 131.

¹⁵⁶ This is one area in which the psychological value of humour is especially relevant. Humour in the music hall had long addressed anxieties, for example about social change (Steven Gerrard, 'The Great British Music Hall: Its Importance to British Culture and "The Trivial"', *Culture Unbound*, 5 [2013], 487–513 [p. 498]). It had a similar function in soldiers' songs, forming an acceptable context for the expression of anxieties. Hanna connects this to a Freudian concept of humour as facilitating discussion of the taboo. (Hanna, 'Fighting Fear with Humour: Songs and Singing in the RFC/RAF, 1914–1918', conference paper, Humour and the First World War, The Open University, London, 20 June 2018).

¹⁵⁷ Bevis, pp. 40–44, 143.

¹⁵⁸ Bergson, p. 20.

extreme stoicism. The conditional, 'If' and 'when' situations in the text demand resolution but break off into a dash and 'Never mind', a phrase that seems reasonable as a response to digging and poor rations but ludicrous as a reaction to invasion and shells, part of the joke here being that 'Never mind' may also be the only possible response to such violence. The use of the refrain to gloss over anything that military life could encompass is in this light a half-serious, half-mocking echo of the stoicism that was stereotypically associated with servicemen: the refrain comes across both as the only possible rejoinder to many of the circumstances described and as a slightly irreverent iteration of the idea that soldiers were, ideally, the epitome of stoicism.

With the refrain in mind, there is some ambivalence in the relationship between those at home and those at the front. Imagined to be the sentiments of 'Your People', the parody is a matter of reassurance and support. The final assertion of 'WE won't mind' opens up a point of connection between the servicemen in training and their loved ones: it is not only soldiers who can be stoical but also those at home who can join in with the attitude. At the same time, an element of the amusement here may be that 'Never mind' is catch-all non-combatant advice – it is possible to imagine that this was necessarily a common response from servicemen's 'people' to a range of complaints, though this is speculative. (The Horace letters, which include jokes at the expense of Hypatia's civilian ignorance, were also published in the *Growler* – so the newspaper did print some teasing of non-combatants elsewhere). This is one moment, that is, where the text is difficult to judge: there may be some joking at the expense of those at home, but the support 'Your People' are said to express in the song could also be straight, an attempt on the writer's part to articulate, in a light-hearted way, a reassuring rendition of how friends and family feel. Perhaps particularly for modern readers, able to confront openly the problematic nature of praising or blaming such things as 'bravery' and 'cowardice' in war, the urging to be 'plucky' at the end of the poem could appear to be a disquieting move that makes psychological robustness a condition of familial support, rather than the statement of encouragement it may have been seen as at the time of the text's publication. Seal sometimes over-states the level of antagonism towards those in the U.K. expressed by contributors to trench journals (or does not distinguish sufficiently between soldierly attitudes to different kinds of people on the home front when assessing this relationship), but his perspective on parody casts some light here. 'Will We – Mind?' echoes his notion that the servicemen who wrote trench newspapers subverted aspects of home culture when they parodied them, but that these same parody texts simultaneously revealed a longing for such familiar parts of civilian life.¹⁵⁹ There is a similar tension between affection and irreverence in 'Will We – Mind?' The peacetime music-hall advice is cast in an only partially serious light as a response to wartime experience, revealing a small gap between civilian and martial life, even as the source text provides a shared reference for those within and without the military.

¹⁵⁹ Seal, pp. 9, 78–79.

Indeed, the choice of Gitana's song as a source corresponds with the popularity of music hall, including the parody that was a staple of such performance.¹⁶⁰ Servicemen's own self-made concerts often reproduced material from the halls directly, while professional shows were frequently staged across the different theatres of war.¹⁶¹ There are many references to such theatre in trench newspapers. The editor of *Lines of Fire* introduced the October 1918 edition, for example, as if it contained a series of variety acts: 'Once more we make our bow to an eager and expectant house, and present an all-star company in our monthly entertainment of varieties [...] permit us to ring up the curtain upon the following appetising programme:—'¹⁶² Elsewhere, the periodicals included, for example, other parodies of Gitana's song, such as 'The Song of the PO Operator' in a 1915 edition of the *Buzzer* ('Tho the wily Hun may strafe | Never mind! | We can well afford to laugh'), and a version in which the focus is alcohol ('If the sergeant drinks your rum, *never mind*').¹⁶³ The *Helm*'s 'Confessions of Noted Personages' saw an interviewee answer 'George Robey', a music-hall star, to the questions 'If not yourself who would you be', 'Your favourite poet', and 'Your favourite hero'.¹⁶⁴ The 'Song Parodies' that appeared in the *Lead Swinger*, meanwhile, included a rewriting of Harry Fay's 'Sea, Sea, Sea': 'Floor, floor, floor, | I have always ignored you of yore' but ever since 'fifteen inches | Started missing me by inches [...] I'm loving you more and more'.¹⁶⁵ There were also multiple parodies of 'Roamin' in the Gloamin', a 1911 work by Harry Lauder, these comic rewritings including lines such as 'Oh! It's roaming in the gloaming | When you're safely back at last', when 'your sentries haven't shot you, | And the rum is flowing fast'.¹⁶⁶

As with the texts already discussed, it seems that reproduction contributed much to the fun of the parodies, rewriting again bolstering the durability of this kind of humorous work. Bevis suggests that music-hall parodies showed 'an insistent repetition' that 'allowed for – and accentuated – slight glitches or departures from the norm', picking up on the phenomena of comedy occurring inside these theatres 'when "machinery" is given the slip'. He rightly describes these effects with reference to Bergson, proposing that 'the audience laughs when something living is encrusted onto the mechanical'.¹⁶⁷ In the parodies, familiar songs are repeated but also adapted to the military world, the differences between source and parody text creating comedy and also marking changed circumstance. Servicemen chose to address their experience by creating parodies of music-hall songs that were current before 1914, rather than referring to or reprinting the many songs from the halls created after the start of the conflict that addressed it directly. Twenty-five per cent of the 921 music-hall songs from the

¹⁶⁰ Music hall was deeply involved in propaganda, for example contributing much to recruitment drives. Sassoon famously attacked it in 'Blighters' (1917). Even so, it remained popular with many servicemen, both when on leave and at the front. Gerrard, p. 500.

¹⁶¹ Gordon Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War: A Revaluation* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 95; Fuller, pp. 99–100; Mullen, *Show Must Go On*, p. 57.

¹⁶² 'Editorial', *Lines of Fire*, October 1918, p. 2.

¹⁶³ 'The Song of the PO Operator', *Buzzer*, 30 November 1915; 'Never Mind', in Kendall, *Poetry*, p. 222.

¹⁶⁴ 'Confessions of Noted Personages No I. Will de Luge', *Helm*, June 1917.

¹⁶⁵ Iodinus Castorius, 'Song Parodies', *Lead-Swinger*, 16 October 1915, p. 2.

¹⁶⁶ 'The Song of the Reconnoitring Patrol', *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, July 1915.

¹⁶⁷ Bevis, pp. 40–44, 143.

1915–18 period that are identified in Mullen’s work had the war as their main theme, music-hall stars addressing ‘rationing, conscription or the new tanks’, just as ‘before the war they had sung about suffragettes, automobiles and the introduction of national insurance’.¹⁶⁸ The preference in trench newspapers for parodies over reprints of songs that were originally about the war suggests that servicemen did not only rewrite existing works because they needed an easy way to address a new subject, but because creating new iterations itself afforded pleasure.

The parodies that appear in trench newspapers reflect the popularity of this kind of humorous writing in music halls as well as in professionally-produced comic periodicals: servicemen’s new versions of earlier texts add to the evidence of machine-age humour’s durability and its capacity to depict a variety of aspects of conflict experience. As in the other texts addressed in this chapter, the amusement invited by trench-newspaper parodies stems partly from their status as rewritings, but the iteration and adaptation they involve also help to create complex pictures of servicemen and of the military world. Parody was used to articulate the everyday challenges involved in new military life via a playful juxtaposition of what was and was not familiar; to gesture towards some aspects of active service that were potential causes of worry; to offer oblique comment on idealistic and propagandistic depictions of soldiers; and to facilitate exploration of what servicemen and their ‘people’ shared, and what they did not.

2.5 ‘Let’s whistle ragtime ditties while we’re bashing out Hun brains’: the Durability of Machine-age Humour.¹⁶⁹

Though far from being the only type of humour at work in the newspapers, machine-age comedy does seem to have had a particular appeal to their editors and contributors, emerging across many different journals in the form of replicated kinds of comedy and comic characters: clownish and knut-like character types, sketches of miscommunication, and parody. This makes the newspapers part of the modern culture that Benjamin discusses: mass, democratic entertainment that reacts against mechanisation. It is a culture that includes comic productions that emerge from, and have undertones of, the horror of dehumanisation threatened by modern technology. Emerging from Bergsonian contrasts between rigidity and flexibility, machine-age comedy criticises the military machine as being over-regulated and as demanding absurd uniformity, and it articulates concerns with the place of the human individual in this environment, showing soldiers grappling with military life and the expectations of martial identity. Servicemen’s experiences are portrayed as entanglements between the administrative, regulatory, and technological machinery of warfare and the human, individually fallible; the journals play with depicting discrepancies between supposedly ordered military communications and the more disruptive behaviour of those who use them; and they express the differences and connections between civilian and military experiences. The frequently satirical pictures of war that feature in the periodicals

¹⁶⁸ Mullen, *Show Must Go On*, pp. 87, 43.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Why Not’, *B.E.F. Times*, 25 December 1917, in Westhorp, *Wipers Times*, p. 261.

diverge from romanticised images useful for recruitment and propaganda; soldiers are represented as falling short, comically, of the dignified, cool devotion to duty associated with heroic ideals of martial masculinity. Equally, however, the newspapers subscribe to and reiterate other idealised conceptions of soldiers as being gallantly, self-deprecatingly humorous, a different, though still patriotic, version of military identity that contributors seem to have preferred.

The depictions of war experience discussed in this chapter were founded on styles of humorous production that had long been popular before the outbreak of the conflict, indicating their durability. Servicemen's periodicals contain similar types of humour to the comic magazines that boomed in the nineteenth century – I have primarily used *Punch* for comparison – even parodying the same songs and works of literature that had been common source texts before the war. Chaplin's tramp character appears frequently in the journals in direct and indirect form, and the influence of music hall emerges in references to particular songs or stars and in the ubiquity of parody. Indeed, machine-age comedy facilitates durability because it relies upon reproduction. As has been seen, part of the joke of Chaplin's work, for example, was that his character and slapstick were iterated in repeated performances, and such replication is reflected in the emergence of Chaplin and Chaplinesque characters in representations of the military. The American humour and knut-like servicemen that feature in trench newspapers follow a similar pattern, these familiar kinds of comedy and characters being rewritten for the wartime context. Trench-newspaper texts giving comic treatment to communications in the military, particularly those dealing with telephones, likewise had multiple, pre-war templates. Parody, finally, was also central to periodicals that were staples of mass publishing long before 1914. Parody has adaptation at its heart, its manifestations in trench journals involving the manipulation of original texts to suit the wartime situation. Forms of amusement that were well established by 1914 thus remained popular with servicemen in their own accounts of the conflict, evoking some striking and nuanced pictures of how individuals related to the military regime and their roles as part of its machinery.

Chapter Three: Short Stories

Humour and the Evocation of Britishness

Short stories enjoyed great popularity during the First World War and the years that surrounded it. There had been a boom in periodicals in the 1880s and 1890s due to improved printing technology, lower publishing costs, and the wider audiences created by increased literacy rates.¹ This flourishing market included a rise in the number of comic papers available, so much so that commentators at the time noted the near inescapable ubiquity of such publications.² Humorous short stories relating to the Great War appeared both in papers that were specifically geared towards amusement and in those monthlies and weeklies that contained more solemn texts as well. These humorous narratives address a huge range of war experiences. The transition between civilian and military identity was a popular topic, including stories that playfully frustrate the expectation that military experience would ‘improve’ those who enlisted, paralleling trench-newspaper narratives in which recruits fall amusingly short of soldierly ideals.³ Two other staples of wartime stories, spy and romance tales, also had humorous manifestations, and elsewhere in the genre satire is directed towards war profiteers, civilians who enjoyed reflected glory from combatants, and pacifists.⁴ Other among the diverse plots found in short fiction of the conflict are the donation of lingerie to a war-relief fund, and soldiers perpetrating pranks at society balls.⁵

My focus is on stories by service authors, writers who published accounts of war experience while serving in the forces. As in the trench-newspaper texts already discussed, these wartime short stories often centre on the representation of servicemen and military identity but, because of the wider, national audience and the greater commerciality of the mainstream periodicals in which they appeared, these portrayals are inflected with and influenced by concerns with Britishness and a need to be marketable to a greater degree than trench-press writing. I demonstrate that the narrators of service-author tales frequently portray their war experience with insouciant humour, creating an impression of aloofness and sangfroid – a kind of ‘stiff upper lip’ – doing so, for example, by using comic understatement to refer to serious hardship: this is not dissimilar from the humour that gives Graves’ speaker in ‘Escape’ a gallant quality. Such humour includes large amounts of self-deprecation, emerging from service authors laughing at their past actions, and superiority theories elucidate the ways in which this invites amusement, the effect that it has on the characterisation of the tales’ protagonists, and the relationship between service-author stories and senses of national identity. Hobbes recognises that

¹ Maunder, ‘Introduction’, *British Literature*, pp. xxxiii–lxiii (p. xxxvii); Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 6.

² Gray counts ‘at least 275’ comic papers being published in England between 1832 and the end of the century. Gray, ‘Uses of Victorian Laughter’, pp. 150–51.

³ For example: Ernest Halsey, ‘A Candidate for the Force’, *Punch*, 2 September 1914, p. 199.

⁴ W. St. G. Drennan, ‘On the Spy-Trail’, *Punch*, 27 January 1915, p. 66; Keble Howard, ‘Miss Pett’s Grand Chance’, *Strand*, 54 (1917), 463–70.

⁵ May Edginton, ‘War-Workers’, *Strand*, 54 (1917), 386–94; Winifred Graham, ‘The Ballunatics’, *Strand*, 56 (1918), 116–19.

amusement can arise from feeling superior to previous versions of oneself: ‘men laugh at the follies of themselves past’, and it is from such retrospective self-reflection that service authors create their comic personas.⁶ Scruton, equally, observes that finding something to laugh at in ‘great m[e]n’ can benefit such figures, because it gives them a more human, accessible character.⁷ Service authors’ tendency to highlight that which is fallible about their past selves, in other words, exudes confidence and encourages audience sympathy: it is part of the appeal of service-author heroism.

As with the humour in the trench press, indeed, the stories articulate idealised, stereotyped, and patriotic pictures of servicemen as maintaining humorous outlooks during their war experience.⁸ Both Hobbes and Scruton draw attention to the ways in which humour can bring people together into a discrete, laughing group, and it is this pleasure of feeling part of a privileged company that the ‘British’ element of service-author stories offers. More so than the machine-age humour of trench journals, service-author humour closely reflected and furthered perceptions of martial and national identity according to which the capacity to make a joke out of the war was seen as a positive ‘British’ quality, and one enjoyed by British soldiers in particular. The version of Britishness presented is patriotic and exclusive, a national identity that did not take account of the many regional and personal identities and political beliefs that existed in Britain at the time of the Great War, but the sense of humour at its heart is depicted, in a propagandistic way, as something with which all who wished to support the war effort could engage. This ‘British’ humour, which helped to portray the war as an event that did not have to be registered as immensely disruptive, is present in the vast majority of the stories discussed, but in the final section of this chapter I provide counter-examples in the form of narratives by Saki and Lewis. In these stories, humour adds to more unsettling impressions of war experience, in particular helping to depict servicemen as being dehumanised. These texts provide a foil to the more widespread and popular tales in which humour is part of the articulation of optimistic attitudes to the conflict. The central claims in this chapter are thus that, in general, humour in First World War service-author narratives contributed to the representation of idealised, stereotyped, and exclusive notions of martial and national identity, and that readers were invited to share in this identity by enjoying the stories’ humour and by continuing to purchase the periodicals that printed them.

⁶ Hobbes, ‘Human Nature’ (1650), in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), pp. 21–108 (p. 55).

⁷ Scruton, p. 168. Scruton’s ideas are often associated with the superiority theory. He does, though, criticise this theory for making what he says is the mistake of looking for the meaning of humour ‘in what it does for the subject, rather than in how it represents the object’ (p. 169).

⁸ The professional press in addition marketed soldierly humour as immediately accessible to home-front readers, contrasting the connection offered when trench newspapers were sent home to a secondary audience of family and friends who (as hinted in Ernie’s note of the previous chapter) may need the in-jokes explaining. Even so, as I have suggested, there are similarities in styles of humour between the trench and professional presses, as well as some authorial overlap: Saki and W. W. Jacobs wrote different stories for both. Saki contributed to the *Bystander*, the *Morning Post*, the *Outlook*, and the *Westminster Gazette* as well as the *Fortnightly Gazette* of the 22nd Battalion Royal Fusiliers (Sandie Byrne, *The Unbearable Saki* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007], p. 271). Jacobs wrote for mainstream publications and the *Hades Herald*, the magazine of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps.

Furthermore, I argue that the humour in service-author stories shows connections with a number of types of writing published before the outbreak of the conflict, just as the comic absurdity in First World War poems reflected some of the characteristics, for example, of nineteenth-century nonsense literature, and trench newspapers replicated machine-age humour established before the war. First, amusing narratives with a military setting had appeared before 1914, providing a precedent for the large numbers of humorous stories about a variety of war experiences that were printed during the Great War. More broadly, second, the insouciant amusement in the stories reflects idealised, patriotic notions of supposedly British humour that were articulated in national periodicals during, but also in advance of, the 1914–18 conflict. In this sense the stories continue the evolution of and engagement with national identity that the rise of a popular national press helped to foster in the nineteenth century, a process most famously identified in Benedict Anderson’s now much-corrected 1983 work.⁹ Finally, some non-humorous forms of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journalism and marketing seem to have influenced the humour in service-author stories. The heroic qualities frequently attributed to service authors – which combine with the writers’ humour to create images of gallant, ‘British’ masculinity – resemble the characterisation and setting of reports by earlier war or special correspondents. In addition, the impression given by service-author humour – that the war was not disruptive but could be laughed off and endured – contributed to an association between New Journalism and steadfastness, with periodicals being marketed as points of stability in a changing society, as pillars of constancy that commented on (and laughed at) political and cultural developments.¹⁰

Service-author short stories, published in periodicals with a national audience that were marketed as means of supporting British forces, are my focus in this chapter because they occupied a central position in the wartime public discussion of humour and senses of national identity; they illustrate humour’s place in popular perceptions of Britishness at a moment in which questions of nationness were heightened.¹¹ As my emphasis on popular texts suggests, my definition of a short story is inclusive, reflecting the broad, nineteenth-century use of the term: ‘short story’ could be used synonymously with ‘the single-episode, prose tale, short narrative, or sketch’.¹² I follow Einhaus’ practical definition of short stories as ‘any self-contained, short, fictional narrative published in a periodical, anthology or collection’, with the qualification that service-author stories are not always strictly invented, but relate in fictionalised form what was presented, though often facetiously, as actual

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: New Left Books, 1983). Most importantly here, Anderson’s concept of national identity ‘assumes that no one is purposefully or even accidentally excluded from the emerging cohesion’ (Anthony Marx, ‘The Nation-State and Its Exclusions’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 117 [2002], 103–126 [p. 105]).

¹⁰ New Journalism was a publishing phenomenon which saw the rise of popular, commercially-driven periodicals in the late-nineteenth century. Kate Jackson, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880–1910: Culture and Profit* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 43.

¹¹ Studying popular stories, indeed, helps to reveal trends in tastes and perceptions, since editors wanted narratives ‘of the same pattern which ha[d] hitherto found favour with their readers’. Michael Joseph qtd. in Kate Macdonald, ‘Popular Periodicals: Wartime Newspapers, Magazines and Journals’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts*, ed. by Catherine Baxter and Ann-Marie Einhaus (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017), pp. 245–60, (p. 257).

¹² Beth Palmer, ‘Prose’, in King, Easley, and Morton, pp. 138–50 (p. 144).

conflict experience.¹³ With the exception of Saki's and Lewis' works, the texts selected do not have the kind of 'new "literary" status' that Adrian Hunter argues the genre developed in the late nineteenth century – they do not have an affinity with or represent senses of modern social fragmentation and change.¹⁴ They are the kind of text typical of *Blackwood's Magazine (Blackwood's)*: 'reflections of middle-class, middle-brow tastes and views [...] "thumping good reads"'.¹⁵ They appeared in widely-read publications: *Blackwood's* itself, the *Strand*, the *Daily Mail* and *Punch*. The latter of these recorded some of its largest circulations during the Great War, being consumed by 'peers, politicians, and common readers alike'.¹⁶ Estimates of the *Strand's* readership immediately before the war reach as high as two million, and *Blackwood's* saw increased popularity during the conflict.¹⁷ From 1914–17 Edinburgh sales rose from '4,900 to 18,500 copies a month', and London sales 'from 4,200 to 13,700 copies a month'.¹⁸ In 1915, meanwhile, the '*Daily Mail* circulation peaked at 1,105,214'.¹⁹ Collections of service-author stories were also popular: Sapper's works published in book form saw sales figures as high as 50,000 in the first year of publication.²⁰ Ian Hay's (John Hay Beith's) *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915) sold over 115,000 copies within the British Empire in its first year of publication.²¹

Humorous short stories are an especially neglected element of what is, despite its popularity during the conflict, an under-researched genre of Great War literature.²² Several notable anthologies have sought to draw attention to First World War short prose, with these including a limited number of works that contain humour and satire, such as Lewis' 'The French Poodle' (Tate) and Evelyn Sharp's 'The Patriot's Day' (Mauder).²³ Elsewhere, critical attention to Great War prose has often centred on life writing and/or on post-war writing.²⁴ Exceptions include Andrew Frayn's and John Onions' references to the propagandistic role of Hay's *First Hundred Thousand*, and Hynes' similar comments

¹³ Einhaus, *Short Story*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Hunter, pp. 1–2, 8.

¹⁵ David Finkelstein, 'Literature, Propaganda, and the First World War: The Case of Blackwood's Magazine', in *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower: Literary Journalism and Literary Scholarship from Fielding to the Internet*, ed. by Jeremy Treglown and Bridget Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 91–111 (p. 93).

¹⁶ 'About', *Punch Magazine Cartoon Archive* (Leary, p. 1).

¹⁷ Einhaus, *Short Story*, p. 44.

¹⁸ Finkelstein, p. 108.

¹⁹ Lise Jaillant, 'Sapper, Hodder & Stoughton, and the Popular Literature of the Great War', *Book History*, 14 (2011), 137–166 (p. 141).

²⁰ Meyer, 'The Tuition of Manhood: "Sapper's" War Stories and the Literature of War', in Hammond and Towheed, pp. 113–28 (p. 116).

²¹ Finkelstein, p. 103.

²² There is also a more general trend in the genre of funny stories tending to lack prestige. See:

Suzanne Ferguson, 'The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1989), pp. 176–92 (pp. 185–86).

²³ Lewis, 'The French Poodle' (1916), in Tate, *Women, Men and the Great War*, pp. 167–73; Evelyn Sharp, 'The Patriot's Day' (1916), in Mauder, *British Literature*, pp. 89–92; Korte and Einhaus' *Penguin Book of First World War Short Stories*, mentioned in the introduction, is also valuable.

²⁴ See, for example: Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979); Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Allen Lane, 1997); Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); Evelyn Cobly, *Representing War: Form and Ideology in First World War Narratives* (Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1993).

on the same author alongside Sapper's *Sergeant Michael Cassidy* (1915) in *A War Imagined*.²⁵ Hynes describes these writers as telling 'tall stories, some of them broadly comical', but worthy of study because of what he judges to be their 'realistic' elements: 'the trenches, the mud, the constant shells'.²⁶ Fussell, in addition, identifies in servicemen's letters and diaries a phenomenon which he calls 'British phlegm'. This is an attitude that involves the absence of emotional expression, similarly to the impassive insouciance that appears in service-author stories. Fussell describes it as a 'refusal of the men to say anything', as filling pages 'by saying nothing', and 'offer[ing] the maximum number of clichés'.²⁷ Humorous Great War stories do not focus on 'horror' and emotional tumult – though as I explain they do sometimes portray highly solemn scenes; however, this does not mean that humour in the texts constitutes untruth, or expressive failure. Rather, the pictures of the war in these stories say much about popular senses of national identity, about what some people thought to be desirable responses to the war, and about how such responses connect with pre-war culture. The stories indicate the importance of such qualities as nonchalance, gallantry, and stoicism to audiences at the time of the conflict. The sort of reticence Fussell observes may not today be seen as an appropriate emotional reaction to armed combat (and especially to the Great War), but instead of dismissing such outlooks, I elucidate them. Many of the stories I analyse are not objects of study elsewhere and, in line with the rest of the thesis, I explicate their humour for the picture it creates of war experience, rather than discounting it because of its optimism, or, as humour in the war has generally been approached, placing it primarily in a psychological and emotional context as a means of boosting morale.

In the first section of this chapter, I draw on Hobbes' and Scruton's superiority theories to demonstrate the ways in which service authors represent themselves and other soldiers with a mixture of humour, self-deprecation, and insouciance. In the second, I connect these portrayals with the public discussion of martial and national humour. I establish how periodicals' stories and marketing in combination encouraged the belief that humour provided a way for readers to emulate servicemen and support British forces, creating a community of laughers of the kind that Scruton in particular discusses. This perspective on amusement, moreover, was built on and extended notions of British humour that developed before 1914. Finally, I include stories by Saki and Lewis that, to different degrees, present the war with mixtures of humour, satire, pathos, and disquiet, the conflict emerging in these works as being emotionally disturbing, contrasting those stories in which the fighting is met with breezy detachment.

²⁵ Andrew Frayn, *Writing Disenchantment: British First World War Prose, 1914–30* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2014), pp. 40–76; John Onions, *English Fiction and Drama of the Great War, 1918–39* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 34–35.

²⁶ Hynes, *War Imagined*, pp. 48–49.

²⁷ He notes that understatement can be 'ironic and comic' but does not go into more detail (Fussell, pp. 181–82).

3.1 ‘You can’t expect glory *and* accuracy for a half-penny’: Service-Author Humour.²⁸

In the previous chapter, I noted that one version of idealised martial masculinity that the writers of trench newspapers tended to perpetuate involved pictures of servicemen as being amused and stoical. A similar kind of soldierly identity is prominent in depictions of servicemen in First World War service-author stories. These, too, represent servicemen as comically error-prone and mischievous: as superiority theories of humour help to elucidate, service-author levity creates a sense of self-deprecation – of the writers laughing at earlier, fictionalised versions of themselves – that highlights sympathetic human fallibility. Service-author tales as a whole, though, are more likely to subscribe to notions of soldierly heroism of the kind often mocked in trench newspapers. Multiple service-author stories show shifts from humorous to more solemn tones as their subject matter moves towards the dangerous, dark aspects of war, the interaction between humour and solemnity contributing to a sense of servicemen having great courage underneath their levity. The narrators of service-author tales adopt light-hearted, emotionally detached perspectives on the incidents they relate, presenting themselves as composed, breezily frivolous, resilient to war’s difficulties, and capable of displaying inner strength and bravery when circumstances require.

Two serials published in *Punch* employ humour in ways that are typical of service-author narratives: one is by R. F. White and is entitled ‘A Territorial in India’ (January 1915–May 1916), and the other is called ‘At the Back of the Front’ or ‘At the Front’ (March 1915–January 1916) depending on the location of its author, Lieutenant Alec Johnston, who also contributed to *Punch* before the war.²⁹ Both include humorous reflections on servicemen’s poor living and working conditions. For example, White refers in February 1915 to the ‘improbable circumstance of my surviving plague, dysentery, enteric, smallpox, heat apoplexy, snakebite and other perils of a prolonged sojourn in India’, and in January 1915 outlines the problems of living in a tent, or rather ‘that portion of it which is not required by some five hundred millions of ants’, which can in five minutes ‘eat a loaf of bread, two pounds of treacle, a tin of oatmeal (unopened), eight bananas, a shaving brush and a magazine’. Some of the ‘more friendly’ of these creatures, he claims, ‘indulge in playful little pranks’: one ‘upset a bottle of ink over a document [he] had just completed’.³⁰ Johnston’s pieces of 8 December 1915 and 15 March 1916, meanwhile, give satirical accounts of unsatisfactory rest periods. The first of these tells the tale of Johnston’s unit being ‘sentenced to rest’, marching ‘deliberately out of a civilized town to a soggy malodorous marsh’ and includes, for instance, the blackly comic assertion that

There are no temptations. The mud is not deep enough to drown oneself, and no good soldier ever uses his rifle or side-arm to commit suicide with.

²⁸ Alec Johnston, ‘At the Front’, *Punch*, 25 August 1915, p. 167.

²⁹ ‘Lieutenant Alec Johnston’, Obituary, *Punch*, 17 May 1916, p. 326.

³⁰ White, ‘A Territorial in India’, *Punch*, 17 February 1915, p. 135; White, ‘A Territorial in India’, *Punch*, 27 January 1915, p. 69.

For two days we lay in a condition of bleak and comatose resignation, while our complaints passed through the usual channels to the usual official terminus. (Wicker, 2s. $6\frac{1}{2}d$).³¹

The 1916 text includes similarly dark humour in its representation of hardship. ‘Once upon a time’, Johnston claims, billets were spaces in which soldiers ‘forgot about the War unless you got an odd shell into the kitchen’:

But now – well, about noon on the first day’s rest, seventy odd batteries [...] set about their daily task of touching up a selected target [...]. This is all right in its way; but the Hun still owns one or two guns opposite us. [...] This is all right in its way; but about 3 p.m. the Hun is roused to the depths of his savage utterance [...] This again is all right in its way [...].³²

Johnston’s facetious attention to subjects such as suicide and bombardment creates strikingly black humour but, as with the difficulties that White describes, the impression created is of a narrator who, stoically, endures his conditions – his humorous outlook being evidence of such resilience. The refrain in his 1916 report encapsulates his attitude: the irony of stating that increasingly perilous conditions are ‘all right’ is tempered by the humour of the understatement involved. That is, there is a tension between the refrain’s irony – which points towards the seriousness of the situations described – and its understatement – which belittles and trivialises the danger, almost suggesting that the narrator’s circumstances really are ‘all right’. The text is a partially mocking but partially straight depiction of soldierly stoicism, seeming both to suggest the ridiculousness of saying that being under intense bombardment is not a problem, and to uphold a sense that humorously underplaying such an experience makes it less problematic. Johnston leaves readers in little doubt as to the nature of conditions on active service, but his humour suggests an ability to endure the front line (or in this case, rest). The same can be said of White’s descriptions, his list of diseases in particular resembling Johnston’s dark comedy.³³

Other frustrations of everyday life on active service that were given humorous treatment include hierarchy and rank, and bureaucracy. Johnston tells a tale, for instance, in which he loses leave papers and must persuade the authorities he is not a deserter, doing so by presenting his problem at a moment when he knows the relevant officer is keen to go to lunch, ensuring that the issue is dealt with swiftly. Here too there is black comedy, ‘I shall arrive at dawn to-morrow just in time to be shot’, he writes, ‘It is true that the last time I was shot at dawn I got up and walked away’, but ‘this is not a reliable

³¹ Alec Johnston, ‘At the Front’, *Punch*, 8 December 1915, p. 476.

³² Alec Johnston, ‘At the Front’, *Punch*, 15 March 1916, p. 180.

³³ A light-hearted take on a disquieting element of hierarchical change, meanwhile, appeared in ‘The Instantaneous Rank-Adjuster’ (1918), the author of which is unknown, and may not be a service author. It is the tale of a servicemen’s trip to see a tailor whose military grandson has invented a solution to rapid changes in rank, changes that, though the story does not focus on the subject, were caused by the need to replace casualties. The Adjuster changes badges with ‘No unpicking; no sewing’. ‘The Instantaneous Rank-Adjuster’, *Punch*, 9 October 1918, p. 230.

precedent'.³⁴ Elsewhere, he tells the story of receiving notice of an inspection by an eminent figure: "Company Commanders", read the message, "will be expected to know everything", information that makes him, a Company Commander, realise that he 'was ill – horribly ill; had been for weeks'.³⁵ Similarly comic presentations of ineffective soldiering appear in 'How to Become a Town Major' (1917) by Captain T. P. C. Wilson (a serviceman gains the titular rank via incompetence, being appointed 'Town-Major of some brick-dust, a rafter and two empty bully-beef tins – all of which in combination bore the name of a village'), and Sapper's 'Bendigo Jones – His Tree', already mentioned in the introduction, in which the hero, a futurist who has 'inflicted' his art on the public, fails to produce anything resembling a tree when asked to do so for camouflage, and is therefore thought to be suffering from shell shock.³⁶

As with the trench-newspaper texts discussed in Chapter Two, all of these stories are partially satirical – they highlight problems with conditions and with being subject to the workings of the military machine, as well as hinting at ways in which soldiers may not be as heroic as they appeared in more idealised pictures. They are also highly self-deprecating. Such tales as 'How to Become a Town Major' and 'Bendigo Jones – His Tree' have elements of Hobbesian ridicule, of 'men laugh[ing] at the infirmities of others, by comparison of which their own abilities are set off and illustrated'.³⁷ In the former, we are invited to take pleasure in the ineptitude and pride of the eponymous Major and all those with whom he shares his office; in the latter, readers are encouraged to take amusement from the aesthetic 'infirmity' of the modernist artist. The stories flatter audiences by placing them firmly on the side of the superior, mocking narrators, sharing their privileged vantage point that cuts through military and personal folly. Hobbes in *Human Nature* (1650) also, however, recognises that people sometimes laugh at themselves. This can be laughter 'at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceedeth from a sudden conception of some ability in himself'. It can also mean, 'men laugh[ing] at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance'.³⁸ As with his comments about laughter arising from feelings of superiority more broadly, Hobbes emphasises that amusement comes about unexpectedly: it is a sense of 'sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves'.³⁹ The humour in service-author stories is not 'sudden', since it is created from writers carefully crafting representations of their previous selves, but service authors do invite amusement at retrospective depictions of themselves, often involving these past selves being involved in comic scrapes and showing fallibility. White jokingly blames his own clumsiness – spilling ink – on ants and, as discussed below, emphasises that his posting does not seem to require actual military action.

³⁴ Alec Johnston, 'At the Back of the Front', *Punch*, 29 September 1915, p. 270.

³⁵ Alec Johnston, 'At the Back of the Front', *Punch*, 15 December 1915, p. 496.

³⁶ Wilson, 'How to Become a Town Major', *Punch*, 21 November 1917, pp. 346–47; Sapper, 'Bendigo Jones – His Tree'.

³⁷ Hobbes, 'Human Nature', p. 54.

³⁸ Hobbes, 'Human Nature', pp. 54–55.

³⁹ Hobbes, 'Human Nature', p. 54.

In Johnston's work, his persona and other servicemen are not above manipulation and being swayed by the relatively unimportant (lunch), nor above pretending illness to avoid responsibility.

Such laughter at past versions of themselves is crucial to Johnston's and White's sympathetic characterisation: it conveys the impression that their unsoldierly quirks are the result of comic exaggeration by authorial presences sufficiently in control to recognise and make light of their own weaknesses. Johnston casts himself as the shirking company commander with a kind of humorous self-deprecation that hints at confidence underneath his reported ineptitude – this kind of self-awareness appearing in such comments as 'I fell back and would have swooned but for – I can't really think why I didn't swoon. Perhaps because there was no one looking'.⁴⁰ Scruton observes that 'people dislike being laughed at [...] because laughter de-values its object in the subject's eyes', but he also illuminates why 'great men' may wish to become the object of others' amusement:

This de-valuing may be much needed and it may even be desired by the object. It is difficult to love a great man with the warmth that characterises normal human relations. In order to do so, it may be necessary to find in him that which can be (however gently) laughed at.⁴¹

Scruton's observation captures the characterisation of White and Johnson well. Their self-deprecation contributes to their portrayal as affable, or 'love[able]'; a straight depiction of them as brave, entirely serious 'great' men could lack 'warmth'.

Indeed, it is more usual for service authors to create comedy from a lack of violence than from engagement with the enemy, the opportunities for comic self-deprecation this afforded being fully exploited, contributing to pictures of servicemen as being removed from heroic, dashing ideals of military men. Although some of the examples above, especially Johnston's writing, hint at potentially disquieting aspects of the conflict, service-author stories are generally more likely to treat the less extreme aspects of war experience with humour – the *Strand* even published a 'Special Humour Number' that did not contain any humorous stories dealing with the war specifically.⁴² White, writing of the experience of territorial soldiers in India, recounts training in which he and his comrades were only allowed blank ammunition after proving they were no 'danger to ourselves and the public', mentions how 'We still get indications that there is a war going on somewhere in Europe', and suggests that rather than being involved in 'slaying Boches' the purpose of the Territorials in India was 'merely ornamental'.⁴³ The relative lack of humorous treatment given to death and injury could have been due

⁴⁰ Alec Johnston, 'At the Back of the Front', *Punch*, 15 December 1915, p. 496.

⁴¹ Scruton, p. 168.

⁴² Einhaus, *Short Story*, p. 48.

⁴³ White, 'A Territorial in India', *Punch*, 12 May 1915, p. 366; White, 'A Territorial in India', *Punch*, 6 October 1915, p. 287; White, 'A Territorial in India', *Punch*, 22 December 1915, p. 506.

to a mixture of factors: a need for periodicals to distract from the war, imperatives to avoid censorship, and/or a desire to present the conflict with an optimistic slant.⁴⁴

This is not to say that service-author stories entirely avoided depictions of that which was dangerous and destructive: rather, they moved towards greater solemnity when doing so, humour and seriousness interacting in these texts in ways that create pictures of servicemen as possessing both good senses of humour and inner strength or resilience. This is true of several works by ‘Centurion’ (J. H. Morgan) and Hay in the stories that make up *The First Hundred Thousand*. In another instance of a parade ground sketch, Hay’s ‘Ab Ovo’ opens with a comic description of drilling, but moves on to solemn statements of patriotic support for the British war effort. The recruits are initially inept – “Move to the right in fours. Form – fours!” [sic] || The audience addressed looks up with languid curiosity, but makes no attempt to comply with the speaker’s request’ – but the end of the tale sees a solemn vow from the Colonel that ‘we’ll make them a credit to the Old Regiment yet!’⁴⁵ ‘The Laws of the Medes and Persians’ gives comic accounts of ‘regimental traditions’, but ends on a solemn note: Hay describes a Captain Wagstaffe handing out identity disks to recruits, and when one man asks Wagstaffe why the disks show soldiers’ religions, he replies ‘Think it over’.⁴⁶ ‘In the Trenches – An Off-Day’ initially makes a joke of serious attitudes (‘You who live at home in ease have no conception of what it is like to lie in a town which is under intermittent shell fire’, such conditions being terrible because of inconvenient crowds of ‘women and children’ running to see the explosion and find souvenirs), but ends with a nineteen-year-old serviceman’s ‘first encounter with sudden death’.⁴⁷ Centurion’s ‘A Day on the Somme’ and ‘The Old Guard’ include similar mixtures of humour and seriousness. The former opens with a brief, facetious description of ‘the scheme of mural decoration in my friend’s room’ at headquarters, before developing into a solemn account of the death and destruction involved in war.⁴⁸ ‘The Old Guard’ starts with a joke: the author announces it as the tale of a ‘West-country regiment’ that spent three weeks in the first battle of Ypres during which ‘they never took their boots off’, one officer believing that ‘he once had a wash’, but goes on to tell the serious tale of their journey and engagements.⁴⁹

Elsewhere, military plots expressed with solemnity are interwoven with lighter narratives relating to romance and home-front settings. A 1916 story by Sapper entitled ‘Retribution’ opens with the narrator and the hero enjoying the height of the Riviera season, especially Jerry Travers, the hero, who has ‘an infinite capacity for consuming cocktails, and with a disposition merry and bright as the morning lark’.⁵⁰ The onset of war sees Travers pitted militarily against his peacetime romantic rival

⁴⁴ Einhaus, *Short Story*, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Ian Hay, ‘Ab Ovo’, in *The First Hundred Thousand* (1915) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), pp. 3–6 (pp. 3, 6).

⁴⁶ Hay, ‘The Laws of the Medes and Persians’, in *First Hundred Thousand*, pp. 37–52 (p. 52).

⁴⁷ Hay, ‘In the Trenches – An Off-Day’, in *First Hundred Thousand*, pp. 200–13 (pp. 200, 213).

⁴⁸ Centurion (J. H. Morgan), ‘A Day on the Somme’, in *Gentlemen at Arms* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1918), pp. 115–32 (p. 115).

⁴⁹ Centurion, ‘The Old Guard’, in *Gentlemen*, pp. 151–67 (p. 151).

⁵⁰ Sapper, ‘Retribution’, *Strand*, 52 (1916), 51–60 (p. 52).

Dressler, who, commanding a German U-boat, attacks a passenger ship on which the woman of their mutual affection is travelling, leaving Travers to rescue her and destroy the submarine. Dressler's military vanquishing is also a romantic defeat, the end of the story seeing a return to the romance plot and the opportunity for the narrator to make his concluding quip: 'Can anyone recommend me a good cheap book in "Things a Best Man Should Know"'.⁵¹ In Sapper's 'The Passing of the Seasick Cow' (1918), similarly, there are shifts from seriousness to humorousness in accordance with switches between front-line and home-front settings. The story sees one character, James, tell the narrator a story about a tank crew becoming trapped, parts of which tale are highly serious and disturbing. The disquieting aspects of the internal military narrative are related with solemnity, and excursions into the home-front setting of the framing narrative involve humour. In another example of a serviceman with knut-like characteristics, James is represented as showing flashes of frivolity and of social audaciousness: at one point he tells the narrator 'at present, it's my story, and it's very rude to interrupt. You may say yes or no, Peter, if your feelings overcome you'.⁵² 'James and the Land Mine' (1915) includes similar shifts.⁵³ It involves an unexpected meeting between the eponymous hero and the narrator, who last met 'before the war' at the 'Pytchley Hunt ball', at which event James sat on some grapes a German waiter had unscrupulously left on a chair, ruining his 'new silk breeches purchased at great cost from his already despondent tailor'. James is a comic figure largely because of his concern with this item of clothing, and because of his interest in such things as the loveliness of his 'pink coat', and delicacies like 'lobster mousse'. As previously discussed, knuts were elsewhere represented as losing their dandyish qualities in the armed forces, and Sapper's own stories often include narratives of war teaching 'individuals how to be "proper" men', with those who remained civilians being characterised as 'repulsively' effeminate.⁵⁴ In light of this, James' character invites a degree of targeted, Hobbesian laughter, the kind of mirth prompted by evaluation of ourselves against others 'by comparison whereof' we 'applaud' ourselves.⁵⁵ James is also seen, though, disregarding his own safety when on a raid and appearing with 'six German helmets, a few bayonets, and a variety of other trophies', this without having relinquished his pre-war passions: he comes across the German waiter, now an enemy soldier, and takes his revenge. Indeed, when 'everything became unpleasantly lively' James is 'The only person who seemed quite oblivious of all the turmoil', concerned only with the German waiter-turned-soldier.⁵⁶ In this respect James, unusually, remains a knut after enlisting, complicating his characterisation. He is not simply a butt for jokes about effeminacy, an object that allows readers to

⁵¹ Sapper, 'Retribution', p. 60.

⁵² Sapper, 'The Passing of the Seasick Cow', *Strand*, 55 (1918), 175–82 (p. 175).

⁵³ Sapper, 'James and the Land Mine', *Daily Mail*, 3 June 1915, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Meyer, 'Tuition', p. 119. Such views reflect broader depictions of non-combatant men: as Bibbings identifies, for example, conscientious objectors especially were ridiculed using homosexual stereotypes, a point to which I return in the next chapter (Bibbings, p. 89).

⁵⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 38.

⁵⁶ Sapper, 'James and the Land Mine', p. 4.

recognise their own ‘eminency’, as elsewhere in Sapper’s oeuvre.⁵⁷ His knut-like tendencies are indulged because he makes a serious contribution to the fighting as well.

Each of these stories, moreover, contains self-conscious comment on the proximity of humour and seriousness in their narratives. The narrator in ‘Retribution’ states that ‘the serious and the gay, the tears and the laughter, come to us’ in ‘jumbled succession’: he comments that though his tone in describing the love-affair has been ‘wantonly flippant’ and the wartime section may ‘savour of melodrama’, ‘is it not life, my masters, is it not life?’⁵⁸ When James in ‘The Passing of the Seasick Cow’ comes to describing the tank crew’s plight he tells his interlocutor: ‘It may have seemed to you that up-to-date I have been speaking with undue flippancy’, but that ‘I’ll cut it now’, because ‘what I’m going to tell you is absolutely great’.⁵⁹ The narrator of ‘James and the Land Mine’ admits he ‘hesitate[s]’ to recount the incident ‘in view of possible doubts being cast on my veracity, and also because of its apparently trifling nature’, but feels compelled to do so given its importance to the failure of his land-mine scheme – this latter example is not explicitly a comment on humour, but the mention of being ‘trifling’ does speak to a concern with lightness.⁶⁰ The texts indicate a need to defend the decorum of including insouciance in war narratives (as well as, in ‘Retribution’ and ‘James and the Land Mine’, a desire to defend the veracity of humorous war tales); the authors seem aware that sensitivity is required when giving comic treatment to conflict experience.

There are some instances in service-author stories in which mixtures of soldierly humour and grit are taken to what seem to be, perhaps especially for modern readers, ridiculous extremes, typically in relatively rare moments where injury and destruction are given humorous treatment. In “‘Shell Out!’” (collected in *Carrying On*, 1917), Hay tells the tale of a practical joke on a relieving unit. The servicemen taking over control are told that, due to the area’s geography, shelling sounds very close when it is actually quite distant. The new unit are eventually forced to doubt the information:

Hush Hall rocked. The Mess waiter appeared.

“A shell has just came [sic] in through the dining-room window, sirr [sic],” he informed the Mess President, “and broke three of they new cups!” [sic]

“How tiresome!” said the Brigadier. “Dug-outs, everybody!”⁶¹

Injury and hospitals receive analogous treatment elsewhere. Johnston’s piece from 1 September 1915 opens ‘The ideal of every good soldier’ is ‘to go through a battle that isn’t really dangerous and emerge from it with a wound that doesn’t really hurt’, going on to describe an engagement in which ‘my troubles

⁵⁷ Hobbes, ‘Human Nature’, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Sapper, ‘Retribution’, p. 54.

⁵⁹ Sapper, ‘Seasick Cow’, p. 178.

⁶⁰ Sapper, ‘James and the Land Mine’, p. 4.

⁶¹ Hay, “‘Shell Out!’”, in *Carrying On – After the First Hundred Thousand* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1917), pp. 24–46 (pp. 44–45).

began'. He describes how an 'evilily disposed person imagined he had seen a bullet come into me and sneaked about it to the doctor', meaning that he is ordered to retire despite his protestations: 'even if [the bullet] had come in it had gone straight on practically without stopping'; 'there must be plenty without bothering about that one, if it was munitions they wanted'.⁶² Johnston's hyperbolically breezy tone is similar to an account of injury in 'First and Second Rations' (1915), which is more disquieting because its author, A. Neil Lyons, was not in the military, but nevertheless adopted the jovial outlook normally reserved for servicemen themselves. He describes a wounded soldier as being unlike those generally seen in the press because he did not have 'a sense of drama': after suffering his injury, the 'bits had been carefully collected and brought to England, where they had been put together again, and now they sat up in bed, bright-eyed and cheerful, and exuberant'. The soldier would prefer to be at the front because there 'They ain't so rigimental [sic]'.⁶³

The mixture of humour and seriousness the stories include creates propagandistic impressions of servicemen as possessing an idealised combination of light-heartedness and resilience. Whereas representations of servicemen in trench newspapers are more ubiquitously humorous, service-author stories sometimes include portrayals of servicemen that tend towards heroic ideals or that, at least, hint more at the existence of heroic streaks underneath surface levity. This greater sympathy for romanticised heroism owes something to home-front periodicals' alignment with cultural mobilisation and propaganda. The Propaganda Bureau in fact recognised the potential value of Hay's stories, and made sure that censors swiftly approved the publication of the *First Hundred Thousand*.⁶⁴ Many of Sapper's stories, meanwhile, though also not commissioned by the government, were first printed in the *Daily Mail*, which had a reputation as a propagandist paper, its editor Lord Northcliffe accepting a post in 1918 directing 'propaganda in enemy countries'.⁶⁵ Sapper's collections were in addition published by Hodder & Stoughton, which was heavily associated with propaganda, and published pamphlets and books on behalf of the government.⁶⁶ Kate Macdonald explains that professionally-produced wartime periodicals as a whole contributed to cultural mobilisation, which included didactic suggestions of how readers 'could conduct themselves': it would be 'impossible to find a popular wartime periodical whose fiction or features encouraged soldiers to desert, workers to strike, or those serving in war industries to

⁶² Alec Johnston, 'At the Front', *Punch*, 1 September 1915, p. 187.

⁶³ A. Neil Lyons, 'First and Second Rations', in *Kitchener Chaps* (London: John Lane, 1915), pp. 77–85 (p. 78). *Blackwood's* in fact published a series entitled 'The Wards in War-Time', by 'a Red Cross Pro', which consisted of entertaining, often humorous reports of life in a military hospital. The January 1916 edition, for example, describes orderlies at 'six o'clock in chilly winter mornings' wondering 'vaguely if life is worth living'. The episode includes an anecdote about an orderly who takes a joke by the Sister seriously: she tells him to let off the fire extinguisher three times a day (Red Cross Pro, 'The Wards in War-Time by a Red Cross Pro.: VIII Orderlies', *Blackwood's*, 199 [1916], 34–39). Other humorous incidents from the series include a soldier playing a practical joke on the staff nurse (he makes her think he has a splinter of extraordinary length in his finger), a serviceman making his own (attached) finger appear to be that of a dead German by painting it with iodine, and patients hiding in bathrooms to avoid unwanted visitors. Red Cross Pro, 'The Wards in War-Time by a Red Cross Pro.: IX Pastimes in the Wards', *Blackwood's*, 199 (1916), 34–56 (pp. 40–44); Red Cross Pro, 'The Wards in War-Time by a Red Cross Pro', *Blackwood's*, 128 (1915), 577–608 (p. 597).

⁶⁴ Finkelstein, p. 102.

⁶⁵ Jaillant, p. 141.

⁶⁶ Jaillant, p. 141.

refuse to contribute any more to the war effort killing their friends and relatives'.⁶⁷ The idealised depictions of servicemen discussed above seem to work on a similar basis, acting as models for how to respond to the conflict.

With varying levels of extremity, then, humour in service-author stories creates impressions of stoicism, aloofness, and insouciance, including self-deprecation of the kind that Hobbes and Scruton identify. Service-author humour often sees writers create comically fallible past versions of themselves, and appear more sympathetic for doing so. Such self-deprecation contributes to the light-hearted side of the mixture of humour and solemnity often seen in service-author tales: these stories give the impression that servicemen, though generally amused, can also be serious when circumstances seem to demand them to be so, revealing themselves to have inner strength and ability. Such pictures are highly idealised and propagandistic, in places tending towards the kind of romanticised heroism often rejected in trench newspapers. They communicate what were seen, for those who wanted to support the British war effort, as commendable responses to the conflict, with humour forming an important part of this.

3.2 British Humour, National Identity, and the Marketing of First World War Periodicals.

The representation of servicemen as possessing both humorousness and inner bravery complements notions of British humour articulated elsewhere in popular periodicals, as well as the wartime marketing of the magazines. The humorous entertainment offered by the publications was presented as a way in which readers on the home front could connect with, or even emulate, servicemen, by engaging in the kind of amusement that was portrayed as a praiseworthy aspect of both soldierliness and Britishness. Part of the pleasure of the stories thus comes from inviting the kind of communal feeling that Hobbes and Scruton identify as important to some kinds of laughter. The ideas of British humour expressed in the periodicals continued from and extended perceptions of national humour that had circulated before the outbreak of the conflict, with the impressions of calmness and stoicism given in the stories discussed also reflecting the periodicals' pre-war marketing, according to which they were sold as stoically recording societal change – as points of stability in an ever-evolving world. It is in addition worth noting a connection with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing that was not especially humorous, but which seems to have had a significant influence: service-author stories and their narrators reflect the style and personas of earlier war or special correspondents, whose work combined factual reporting with the kind of plots and heroes found in adventure stories. These correspondents presented themselves as dashing, heroic, and close to the action, providing an accessible and pleasurable way for readers to engage with conflict and imperial life, and the service-author stories continue this pattern. First, though, service-author stories had precedents in the form of humorous narratives with a military setting published before 1914.

⁶⁷ Macdonald, p. 257.

Military life provided the context in which contributors to periodicals developed humorous tales and sketches of misadventure and mishap before the Great War. For instance, in ‘The Snowflake of the Service’ (1899), a ‘naval gentleman’ tells the story of ramming a derelict vessel, partly to impress two ladies who had been taken on board, the result of which is that the spotless gunboat is covered in the abandoned vessel’s cargo of treacle.⁶⁸ Similarly humorous is ‘The Soldier’s Progress’ (1901), the tale of the protagonist, Wellington Marlborough Smith, attempting to live-up to his military name by rising through the ranks of the armed services, a task which requires him to source ever-increasing funds for social expenses.⁶⁹ ‘A Sweep of the Pen’ (1911) centres on how the life of an ordinary soldier is affected by army bureaucracy; it is not comic in structure or amusing throughout, but it does involve moments of humour, such as the opening account of how ‘That great prop and mainstay of the comic journalist, the almighty War Office, issued forth an order’, and how the extra training the hero has to undergo involves a ‘squad of beer-laden old men hopping about, jumping over forms, bending and stretching their knees, and going through many other contortions’, another take on the humorous possibilities of drilling.⁷⁰ The theme also appears in ‘The More than Usually Gay Soldier at Islington’ (1901), in which it is argued that ‘comic relief’ might be introduced to the armed services via ‘comic squad drill’: ‘At the caution of the Instructor, “Prepare to grin”, the recruit will bring his right eyebrow sharply up to the level of the lobe of his left ear’.⁷¹ In ‘An Eddy of War’ (1907), meanwhile, the protagonist, James, has been ill and to prevent distress his wife has kept from him the news that war has broken out, meaning that when he is recovered enough to leave the house he fails to stop for a sentry and (to his bemusement) is detained. The challenge ‘Alt-oo-goes-there?’ puzzles him because ‘it sounded like English, yet conveyed no sense to his mind’, and ‘he walked on, not feeling personally interested’.⁷² Further sketches and parodies that, though not short stories, foreshadow service-author humour (as well as trench-newspaper humour) include: ‘Plans for the Defence of London’ (1900), featuring such suggestions as ‘The fleet of the Penny Thames Steamboats to receive a coat of paint to fit them for active service’, and ‘military statues to be washed and put in good order’; and ‘The Way to the Service; or, Then, Now, and To-Morrow’ (1900), the writer of which satirises imagined changes to martial training.⁷³ Non-military characters from before 1914 could, moreover, be transformed into soldiers with the outbreak of war. The protagonist of one wartime series, Sam Briggs, had first appeared in the *Strand* before the conflict in stories published 1904–06 and underwent the transformation from civilian to soldier in 1915 alongside many of those who read about him.⁷⁴ As with the First World War poetry and trench newspapers already

⁶⁸ Frank Stockton, ‘The Snowflake of the Service’, *Strand*, 18 (1899), 401–08.

⁶⁹ Arthur A’Beckett, ‘The Soldier’s Progress’, *Punch*, 22 May 1901, p. 391.

⁷⁰ ‘A Sweep of the Pen’, *Blackwood’s*, April 1911, pp. 550–54 (pp. 550, 552).

⁷¹ A’Beckett, ‘The More than Usually Gay Soldier at Islington’, *Punch*, 5 June 1901, p. 419.

⁷² ‘An Eddy of War’, *Blackwood’s*, April 1907, pp. 454–72 (p. 454).

⁷³ A’Beckett, ‘Plans for the Perfect Defence of London’, *Punch*, 21 February 1900, p. 133; A’Beckett, ‘The Way to the Service; Or, Then, Now, and To-Morrow’, *Punch*, 21 February 1900, p. 129.

⁷⁴ There was also continuity of authorship. Several writers worked for *Punch*, for example, before and during the war, including Milne, Ernest Halsey, and R. C. Lehmann. For examples of Sam Briggs stories, see: Richard Marsh, ‘The Girl on the Sands’, *Strand*, 28 (1904), 423–33; Marsh, ‘The Gift Horse’, *Strand*, 29 (1905), 281–90; Marsh, ‘Her Fourth’, *Strand*, 30

discussed, humorous short stories of the Great War thus had some strong precedents in literature published before 1914, once again suggesting the robustness of humorous forms of writing.

Another important influence on the representation of Great War servicemen as humorous, stoical, and dutiful is the figure of 'Tommy Atkins', or the 'smiling Tommy', the most influential representation of which character type is Kipling's. Used as a generic name for private soldiers in the British military long before the Great War, Tommy Atkins as he appears in Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892) – poems initially published in the *Scots Observer* in 1890 – is given the kind of characteristics that are later attributed to soldiers in service-author stories of the First World War.⁷⁵ Hynes notes the impact of the Tommy Atkins character on the portrayal of the soldiers in Sapper's *Sergeant Michael Cassidy* and Hay's *First Hundred Thousand*, writing that Tommy is 'the ur-figure of the entire tradition' to which these authors' servicemen belong. He is the 'archetypal British enlisted man', 'brave, comical, devoted, prosaic'. Going further, in fact, Hynes speculates, 'It may be that Kipling, by writing about British soldiers in this mode, made them like that', his suggestion being that Kipling's representation of Tommy encouraged men enlisting in the Great War to mimic the character's attitude.⁷⁶ This idea gives a new perspective on the vexed relationship between wartime stories and the 'realities' of the war, and on the way in which the narratives privilege and encourage certain kinds of patriotic, dutiful responses to the conflict. Real servicemen adopted the fictional Tommy's outlook, potentially fuelling additional literary representations of this character type. Indeed, the idea that even propagandistic, fictional portrayals of soldierly good humour and stoicism were entangled with a culture of life imitating art adds to the persistent sense given by service-author stories of overlap between what was factual and what was not, ambiguities that leave open the possibility that British servicemen really were as gallant as the stories suggest, while maintaining the stories' value as entertainment.

Certainly, a large part of the appeal of service-author stories seems to have been their writers' status as current serving soldiers, with their humour appearing to be a genuine part of what life in the military was like. Service authors' proximity to the fighting is emphasised in the periodicals, reflecting associations made in their marketing between the publications and those in the forces. Johnston's obituary in *Punch* by a 'brother-officer' and 'rather especial friend', helps to illustrate this. The obituarist emphasises that Johnston wrote in front-line conditions: he describes Johnston 'lying flat on his face in a tiny dug-out [...] in the front-line trench, dashing off the first half of one of his quaint articles to *Punch*' before breaking-off to go on patrol, having a 'scrap' with 'Bosch' rivals and then returning 'soaked to

(1905), 760–70; Marsh, 'That Hansom', *Strand*, 31 (1906), 564–71; Marsh, 'Sam Briggs Becomes a Soldier: III. Two Stripes', *Strand*, 49 (1915), 334–44.

⁷⁵ Kipling, 'Tommy', *Barrack-Room Ballads*, pp. 6–9.

⁷⁶ Hynes, *War Imagined*, pp. 49–50. Hynes' suggestion is also relevant to servicemen's portrayals of themselves in trench newspapers, in which publications the name of Tommy Atkins frequently appears. For example, Harvey's poem 'A True Tale of the Listening Post' is prefaced with the comment 'Men are queer things right through – whatever make | But Tommy Atkins really takes the cake' (Harvey, 'A True Tale of the Listening Post', *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, September 1915). The poem gives a comic perspective on events for which Harvey and his friend R. E. Knight received Distinguished Conduct Medals. It contrasts the official, more aggrandising account printed in the same edition of the trench newspaper (Report, *Fifth Gloucester Gazette*, September 1915).

the skin and covered with mud, to finish his article in time for the post'. He adds that Johnston, if alive, would 'have had a decoration conferred for his work in this last show', and concludes that 'his articles were awfully appreciated by every one out here, and in his quaintly witty way he caught perfectly the spirit "at the Front"'.⁷⁷ Johnston appears as the embodiment of the stoical, brave, witty persona he adopted in his stories, with the purported popularity of his writing with servicemen, and supposed ability to capture faithfully the essence of front-line life, licensing and legitimising his account of the conflict. The claims in the obituary tie-in with the paper's self-promotion: it defined itself as a patriotic form of entertainment.⁷⁸ A 1915 advert in the publication, for example, endorsed what was billed as a 'good cause': a system whereby 'one Year's supply [of *Punch*] will be sent to a Member of the Forces [...] for a special subscription price of 16/-', because 'A little silver brings so much golden laughter' (figure 15).⁷⁹ Complete with illustrations of servicemen gathered round *Punch* while laughing, the advert makes a direct emotional plea. It quotes an 'Extract from letter [sic]' that reads 'If you could only send "Punch" every week, it would be worth its weight in gold' before asking 'Surely you will not be deaf to that appeal!' It is also asserted that the paper could aid the fighting: 'A man who laughs well fights well', an idea made more explicit in the centre of the advert with the boast that 'Everyone who makes a soldier laugh – whether at the Front or at home – is helping to win his country's battles'.⁸⁰ Similar marketing, though not specifically in relation to humour, appeared in the *Strand*, which could be 'sent to the troops free of charge', and which claimed of itself that 'No Magazine is so Popular in the Trenches' (figure 16).⁸¹

⁷⁷ 'Lieutenant Alec Johnston', p. 326.

⁷⁸ Mike Benbough-Jackson, 'Punch and World War I', *Punch Historical Archive*, 2014 <<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/punch-historical-archive-18411992/punch-essays.aspx>> [accessed 2 March 2017].

⁷⁹ 'Our Soldiers Love a Laugh', advert, *Punch* 27 January 1915, p. x. Thanks to Andrew McCarthy for drawing my attention to this advert.

⁸⁰ 'Our Soldiers Love a Laugh'. *Punch* also intermittently printed a 'Roll of Honour', recording the achievements and deaths of previous contributors in the forces. Those reported missing or dead included: Phillip Baynes, George Brown, Harry Gittins, J. S. M. Tombs, and Johnston himself. See: Owen Seaman, 'Punch's Roll of Honour [Phillip Baynes]', *Punch*, 6 October 1915, p. 285; Seaman, 'Punch's Roll of Honour [George Brown]', *Punch*, 5 December 1917, p. 387; Seaman, 'Punch's Roll of Honour [Harry Gittins]', *Punch*, 4 April 1917, p. 217; Seaman, 'Punch's Roll of Honour [J. S. M. Tombs]', *Punch*, 22 September 1915, p. 248; Seaman, 'Punch's Roll of Honour: [Alec Johnston]', *Punch*, 3 May 1916, p. 296.

⁸¹ Cover, *Strand Magazine*, 51 (1916).

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—JANUARY 27, 1915.

Our Soldiers love a laugh

THERE is nothing like laughter to lighten troops for the grim work there is to do. A man who laughs well fights well. The future historian who takes no note of our soldiers making jokes about "Black Marias" in the trenches will fail to appreciate the spirit of our men who have fought so bravely against such mighty odds.

Everyone who makes a soldier laugh—whether at the Front or at home—is helping to win his country's battles.

"If you could only send 'Punch' every week, it would be worth its weight in gold."—*Extract from letter.*

Surely you will not be deaf to that appeal! And send "Punch" not only to your Officer friends but to the men as well. For "Punch" is not a class journal, but a national journal. "Punch" enshrines the spirit of national humour. A little silver brings so much golden laughter—will you not spend it in so good a cause?

During the War one Year's supply will be sent to a Member of the Forces, to any address throughout the World, for a special subscription price of 16s. The copy will be sent weekly—to Training Centre, Colonial Depot, or Fighting Line—and the address can be changed every time the Regiment is moved, or as often as desired. Special terms will be quoted to employers who wish to send copies to members of their staff.

"Punch" in Camp.

"Punch" in the Trenches.

SEND THEM PUNCH

Send 16/- to the Secretary, "Punch" Office, Bowyer Street, London, E.C. together with the name and address to which "Punch" is to be sent.

Figure 15: 'Our Soldiers Love a Laugh', advert, *Punch* 27 January 1915, p. x.

GRAND NEW YEAR NUMBER
18 STORIES AND ARTICLES

Sleet and snow
May be about;
Fry's Cocoa
Will keep them
out.

"THE ESSENTIAL
FAMILY FOOD."
See Page 22.

SOUTHAMPTON
STREET

THE
JAN 21 1916
STRAND
MAGAZINE

No
Magazine
is so Popular
in the Trenches
as the "Strand"

THIS COPY WILL BE SENT TO THE
TROOPS FREE OF CHARGE IF
YOU HAND IT OVER THE
COUNTER AT ANY
POST OFFICE.

January,
1916.
SIXPENCE.

Subscription
Rate (post free)
to any part of the
World except
Canada, 10/- per
annum; Canada
8/- per annum.

N^o 301
VOL 51

AN ILLUSTRATED MONTHLY

Figure 16: Cover, *Strand Magazine*, 51 (1916).

The *Punch* advert includes the statement that the periodical was suitable for both men and officers because "'Punch' is not a class journal, but a national journal", and it 'enshrines the spirit of national humour', a statement that not only reflects a popular belief that the conflict could be a great leveller, but also points towards ideas expressed elsewhere that there existed a particularly British style of humour that could be associated with servicemen especially.⁸² A reviewer of Sapper's *No Man's Land* (1917) observes that 'as in most war fiction, humour predominates', adding that 'soldiers do not treat the war as a joke, but they are incurably light-hearted'. Sapper is described as 'a jester' who is 'typical of a very large class of soldier-authors'.⁸³ In October 1914 F. A. Clement of the *Academy and Literature* praised the humour shown by 'Tommies', asserting that their letters offer glimpses of France's 'agony', but that these are followed by 'some escapade full of light-hearted fun, or some happy jest' at the enemy's expense. Clement delights in the idea of British soldiers mocking the German war machine: the German military 'may have strength, but may never have faith or humour', with 'the Prussian' lack of humour contributing to 'the menace of militarism'. Clement concludes that, because humour is a valuable 'military quality', there is cause for British optimism.⁸⁴ A series of *Strand* articles on visual art, furthermore, includes the claim that the work of Bert Thomas, a *Punch* cartoonist who served in the

⁸² 'Our Soldiers Love a Laugh'.

⁸³ 'Fiction', rev. of *No Man's Land* by Sapper, *The Spectator*, 18 August 1917, p. 17.

⁸⁴ F. A. Clement, 'Humour in the Trenches', *The Academy and Literature*, 24 October 1914, pp. 395–96 (p. 396).

Artists' Rifles, 'expresses the spirit of good humour' with which the B.E.F. 'is animated'.⁸⁵ A December 1916 issue of the same magazine suggests that humour can unite people at home with those in the military: the comedy of Leonard Raven-Hill's drawings is presented as both particularly enjoyable to men who have 'endured the rigours of the barrack square' and 'apparent to all'. Raven-Hill specialises in 'the humours of life in the Services', such that 'a million or two' citizens might fully appreciate his humour after signing-up, but at the same time, 'humour is to be found in the drawing-room and slum not less than in barracks or on board His Majesty's ships'.⁸⁶ Similar ideas appear elsewhere in the series. Bairnsfather's humour is described as being 'redolent of the British trenches'. He is "'really and truly" a war humorist'; he captures the 'phlegm and his high spirits', the 'imperturbable good humour' of 'Tommy Atkins'. The artist's 'unique capacity for humour would have remained unknown', the *Strand*'s commenter claims, had it not been for the conflict. Bairnsfather is connected to the 'revelation of the supposedly glum and stolid British as brimful of invincible gaiety', and to the idea that it would require long-acquaintance with the 'British temperament', to 'reconcile our incorrigible surface levity with that tenacity of purpose which lies beneath'. His drawings are paid the 'high compliment' of being 'almost meaningless' to 'foreign eyes': 'only the British mind, and more particularly the English (though Captain Bairnsfather is a Scot)' can 'relish' his humour fully. Bairnsfather's drawings capture 'the inherent humour of the situation' and 'breathe the very spirit of Tommy in the trenches', appealing to 'us' for this reason and remaining 'unintelligible' to 'foreigner[s]'.⁸⁷ The same idea is expressed in an article on the artist G. L. Stampa, whose work is imagined to 'perplex' 'foreigner[s]'.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, it is asserted that: the British prefer 'to laugh at our enemies rather than to hate them', and that artist Alfred Leete's work is 'so essentially English' because of his 'unruffled good humour' – where 'the Frenchman stabs, or the German would clumsily belabour, the Englishman merely derides'.⁸⁹ A piece on the sketchbook of Lieutenant Walter Kirby by F. W. Martindale, meanwhile, emphasises the psychological benefits of peculiarly British 'humorous proclivities' and the "'incurable levity" of the British', qualities that are again said to 'astonish' Britain's allies.⁹⁰ Martindale asserts that soldiers' 'grim' humour is 'a synonym for a sense of proportion', and that the armies of Mons, Ypres, and the Somme '*jested* their way through every obstacle' (Martindale's emphasis). Kirby is quoted confirming that 'if troubles were taken seriously' at the front, then 'one would very quickly go under'.⁹¹

Humour had also been presented as a valuable national asset before 1914. Ideas of a national humour seem to have been inspired by Bergson's theory of humour in particular, which was translated

⁸⁵ Adrian Margaux, 'The Humour of Bert Thomas', *Strand*, 55 (1918), 297–301, (p. 301).

⁸⁶ 'Raven-Hill: Humorist', *Strand*, 52 (1916), 679–83 (pp. 680–83).

⁸⁷ 'A Great Humorist of the Trenches', *Strand*, 51 (1916), 317–32 (pp. 317, 318, 319). The contradiction over Bairnsfather's nationality points to the way in which notions of British humour do not take account of different identities within Britain (discussed below).

⁸⁸ 'The Humorous Urchin', *Strand*, 53 (1917), 276–80 (p. 278).

⁸⁹ 'The Artist with the Funny Ideas', *Strand*, 51 (1916), 96–102.

⁹⁰ F. W. Martindale, 'A Sketch-Book from the Trenches: The Work of Lieutenant Walter Kirby', *Strand*, 53 (1917), 222–27 (p. 222).

⁹¹ Martindale, pp. 222–23.

into English in 1911. Several reviewers disagreed with Bergson on the grounds that his work was shaped by a specifically French outlook, taking the opportunity to argue for the existence of a unique kind of British humour that was more nuanced than that enjoyed by other nations. For the *Athenaeum*'s commentator, Bergson did not address the kinds of comedy central to 'English, Irish, and Scotch psychology', countries in which the 'laugh boisterous', 'humorous and akin to tears', and 'internal', s/he claimed were central. The British, according to this model, laugh at themselves – at 'our own superabundant energy' – rather than at those who are weaker; there is 'a lightness' in 'laughter of the purer kind'.⁹² John Palmer of the *Saturday Review*, meanwhile, proposed that 'French laughter is criticism [...] with none of the half-tones of sentiment and sympathy which are in English laughter'. Palmer asserts that in French literature tragedy and comedy are separate, whilst Shakespeare, for example, 'filled his tragedies with clowns'.⁹³ (Unsurprisingly given the wartime context, Freud's *Jokes* was also met with criticism when it was translated in English in 1916, though it seems to have attracted very limited attention in the British press, which lack of response itself reflects antagonism).⁹⁴ Less condescending, but more defensive of British cultural power in the face of its potential decline, is a *Strand* article entitled 'Are We Funnier Than Our Grandfathers?' (1906), which responded to an allegation by a 'famous American humorist' (it is not clear who) that 'the English' had 'far less and a slower perception of a joke than they had fifty years ago', being entertained by 'the mechanical flippancies of *Punch*' and by musical comedy (both associated with machine-age humour). Seemingly keen to defend British periodicals as well as the nation's sense of humour, the editors reacted 'to this sweeping denunciation' by asking 'England's leading mirth-makers' for their views on the matter, with such figures as Shaw, Jerome, and Owen Seaman, the editor of *Punch*, all testifying that British humour was not waning.⁹⁵ The *Strand*'s self-consciousness about amusing illustration could also be couched in national terms. For example, a follow-up article to that on 'Style in Comic Art' (1901) was published later the same year to provide a comparison between British and American artists, with a selection of the latter being given the opportunity to illustrate the same comic situation as the group of British artists featured in the earlier piece.⁹⁶ A 1901 article by Walter Emanuel on 'British Wit and Humour' in the *Pall Mall Magazine*, finally, anticipates the ways in which, during the war, British humour was associated with hardship. Emanuel notes a 'vogue' for 'humorous accounts of tragic occurrences', for example in reporting on court cases.⁹⁷ Perceptions of British humour articulated in the wartime period thus developed from and extended some similar notions expressed before the outbreak of the conflict, though it is worth noting that, as might be expected, the wartime commentaries are far more hyperbolic

⁹² 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic', *The Athenaeum*, 6 January 1912, p. 5.

⁹³ John Palmer, 'The Laughter of the French', *The Saturday Review*, 23 March 1912, pp. 362–63 (p. 362).

⁹⁴ Norman Kiell, *Freud Without Hindsight: Reviews of His Work, 1893–1939* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1988), p. 341.

⁹⁵ 'Are We Funnier Than Our Grandfathers?', *Strand*, 32 (1906), 740–44 (pp. 740, 740–44). The author's use of 'England' and 'English' seems to be an example of using these terms to mean 'Britain' and 'British' (Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], p. 65).

⁹⁶ 'Style in American Comic Art', *Strand*, (38) 1909, 445–50.

⁹⁷ Emanuel, 'A Note on British Wit and Humour', *The Pall Mall Magazine*, 24 (1901), 421–23 (p. 421).

in their patriotism, with the war at points being presented as a good opportunity to exercise humour as a great national asset.⁹⁸

Superiority theories, which have to do with making comparisons and drawing lines between laughers and laughed-at, suggest why humour may have been well-fitted to generating senses of a discrete British group, and what is gained by experiencing amusement as a communal feeling. Hobbes' primary concern is with laughter in the form of ridicule, a divisive kind of mirth involving separation between one's own 'eminency' and the 'infirmities' of others.⁹⁹ The ideas of British humour described above highlight the advantages of one particular group, but this is not explicitly based on a separation between those who are amused and those who are the object of amusement – the impression is not that other nationalities are ridiculed, but that other nationalities do not experience as much mirth (or such admirable kinds of mirth). British humour does, however, resemble Hobbes' notion of laughter 'without offence': this is mirth 'at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons', which takes place 'where all the company may laugh together'.¹⁰⁰ Here, feelings of inclusion and belonging are important to the generation of mirth, suggesting the significance of laughter as something that can draw people together. Scruton's understanding of how laughter can create a sense of community, meanwhile, applies particularly well to the self-deprecating element of British, service-author humour. He notes that 'Without the mitigation of friendship it is painful to be the object of laughter', but that 'To lower the object is not necessarily to raise the subject; it might be to lower both together. It is by the universal lowering that one may come to feel "kinship" with the thing at which one laughs'.¹⁰¹ The self-deprecation in much service-author humour, that is, strengthens the sense of familiarity and community offered by British humour because it gives a sense of 'kinship' in the process of comic 'lowering'.

Sheila Lintott notes that 'the superiority theory explains the nature and value of some humor [...] and articulates some issues and debates concerning the ethics and etiquette of some humor'.¹⁰² Such questions surround the concepts of national humour that provided the context for service-author stories: the corollary of the sense of community that British humour offers is the question of whom such humour may or may not include. The privileged group of laughers that ideas of British humour create exclude members of other nations, as well as skimming over the variety of identities that existed within Britain: the humour in which readers are invited to share is accessible only to those willing to accept the kind of patriotism it espoused. The response to the war posited by the humour described is one of endurance and acceptance, leaving little room for any who did not support the fighting. As suggested in relation to the representation of knuts, furthermore, there is sometimes only a narrow line between invitations to

⁹⁸ Some pre-1914 discussions did not present humour as being particularly British. This is true of a *Strand* article about *Punch*'s representation of warfare (J. Holt Schooling, 'War-Pictures in *Punch*', *Strand*, (19) 1900, 321–31), and of one of the examples Emanuel gives: he recounts a joke by Britain's opponents in the Boer War at the expense of a British sentry ('A Note on British Wit and Humour', p. 421).

⁹⁹ Hobbes, 'Human Nature', p. 54.

¹⁰⁰ Hobbes, 'Human Nature', p. 55.

¹⁰¹ Scruton, pp. 168, 169.

¹⁰² Sheila Lintott, 'Superiority in Humor Theory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74 (2016), 347–58 (p. 348).

feel part of a group characterised by a patriotic, stoical sense of humour, and invitations to enjoy dark Hobbesian ridicule of others who do not display the kind of behaviour deemed appropriate to the conflict. Likewise, the British humour discussed does not take account of variations in regional identity, or in different senses of national identity within Britain. ‘English’ and ‘England’ are at points used to mean ‘British’ and ‘Britain’, a common usage at the time, but one that reveals a failure to recognise potential differences between the nation’s constituent countries and regions – this is particularly striking given the turbulence of Irish politics during the war. In the stories with an imperial context, such as the ‘Territorial in India’ series, furthermore, the ‘Britishness’ of the humour articulated does not seem to extend to those belonging to British colonies, with much of the comical complaining from White’s persona emerging from discourse according to which India is presented as an unpleasant and out of the way posting. His final column ends with the assertions that ‘India is a marvellous and unique country’, that ‘to have lived in it is an education and joy’, and ‘to have guarded it a proud Imperial privilege’, but ‘most of us would give something to get out of it and into Europe’.¹⁰³ This is one moment in which British humour does feature divisive Hobbesian superiority. White’s ‘us’ is telling, presumably referring to the group of British soldiers to whom he belongs, and implying but not making explicit a ‘them’ – ‘they’ seeming to be part of the imperial possession that White and his company ‘guard’. Einhaus argues that First World War stories allowed readers to ‘model their own behaviour on that of fictional characters’, and to give ‘meaning to the personal by relating it to the general’, linking their own experiences to those depicted in popular magazines.¹⁰⁴ The humour in service-author stories serves a similar function with regard to a highly exclusive version of national identity.

Indeed, the conceptions of national humour articulated during the war perpetuated the senses of collective, and restrictive, identity that had been fostered in periodicals and newspapers in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁵ As Gerry Beegan writes, via its ‘editorial and advertising content, the press helped to shape a collective [...] consciousness’, including national consciousness, that was not ‘monolithic’ but was patriotic in an exclusive sense.¹⁰⁶ This was achieved by periodicals providing ‘a sense of a shared experience and a guide for how one might behave’.¹⁰⁷ George Newnes in particular, founder of many popular titles, including the *Strand*, has been credited with constructing a perception of ‘a reading community brought together by a shared national identity and the enjoyment of culturally and morally

¹⁰³ White, ‘A Territorial in India’, *Punch*, 17 May 1916, p. 326.

¹⁰⁴ Einhaus, *Short Story*, pp. 3–4, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Writing in 1886, W. T. Stead, a key figure in New Journalism, claimed the ‘telegraph and the printing-press have converted Great Britain into one vast agora, or assembly of the whole community’. Qtd. in Andrew Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire, 1870–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Beegan, pp. 1, 26. Chiming with this sense of comfort is the marketing of periodicals as clubs. Newnes emphasised the idea of his magazine as a social environment, a club of readers and writers who identified with its contents (Kate Jackson, p. 102). *Punch*, too, operated and presented itself as a ‘literary brotherhood’ (Leary, p. 1). By the 1890s there was a well-established association between periodicals and, in Kasson Fiss’ words, the ‘physical and imagined spaces and places of clubs’ (Laura Kasson Fiss, “‘The Idler’s Club’: Humor and Sociability in the Age of New Journalism”, *Victorian Periodicals*, 49 [2016], 415–30 [p. 2]).

healthy literature’ – an ‘imagined community’ that has a similar kind of exclusivity to the senses of nationalism that Anderson discusses.¹⁰⁸ Of especial relevance to service-author stories are the reports of nineteenth-century special correspondents, also often known as war correspondents, who represented themselves as ideals of glamorous, daring masculinity and who encouraged readers to engage imaginatively with the empire in the same way that periodicals as a whole stimulated patriotic senses of national identity.¹⁰⁹ Andrew Griffiths argues that special correspondents ‘linked events on the imperial frontiers to the parlours and kitchens of British homes’, producing a ‘mediated experience of empire which was readily comprehensible to British readers’.¹¹⁰ Blurring the lines between fiction and journalism, their work had a sensationalist and novelistic style designed to appeal to the new mass readership: special correspondents were close to the news and combined reportage with adventure stories, inviting readers to experience the British Empire, in fictionalised form, vicariously.¹¹¹ Special correspondents themselves were presented as ‘paragon[s] of imperial masculinity’, possessing a combination of great hardiness and gentlemanly manners, and appeared ‘as heroes in their own narratives’.¹¹² Griffiths points out that the ‘golden age’ of the special correspondent was over by the end of the century.¹¹³ Their legacy, though, is seen clearly in the service-author stories addressed above. Sapper was sometimes referred to as a war correspondent, while the serials by White, Johnston, and the ‘Red Cross Pro’ in particular are presented as journalistic reportage.¹¹⁴ White’s position in India means that his serial has an especially close parallel with those nineteenth-century columns in which readers were given a picture of British imperial expansion via adventure-like tales. Though, importantly, White also places self-deprecatingly amusing emphasis on feeling removed from any actual fighting, as already noted, his work playing with the convention that special correspondents were at the centre of events, perilously close to danger. Playfulness with the service-author form had also been seen before 1914: a series of letters entitled ‘Our Mr Jabberjee in the Far East’ was published in *Punch*, the work of a fictional correspondent who claims, for example, in April 1904 to be writing from the ‘War-Correspondents’ Compound, Tokyo, Japan’, a reference to the Russo-Japanese War.¹¹⁵

The continuity between pre-war and wartime manifestations of the periodicals speaks to the fact that they were marketed as points of stability in a world of flux, this projection of unflappability in fact chiming with the steadfastness attributed to servicemen in the magazines’ short stories. A *Punch* editorial in 1911, for example, listed a number of fashions and innovations that had been mocked in the magazine, including the bicycle, the telephone, lawn tennis, new words, and ‘the rise of the aesthetes’, the implication being that *Punch*’s derision was a source of constancy in an ever-changing world.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁸ Beth Palmer, p. 143.

¹⁰⁹ Griffiths, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Griffiths, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Griffiths, pp. 17, 31, 13, 22.

¹¹² Griffiths, pp. 31–32, 39.

¹¹³ Griffiths, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ For an example of Sapper being described in this way, see: ‘Fiction’, rev. of *No Man’s Land*, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ F. Anstey, ‘Our Mr Jabberjee in the Far East’, *Punch*, 20 April 1904, p. 286.

¹¹⁶ ‘1841–1911’, *Punch*, 19 July 1911.

Punch's editors also, in a similar appeal to the enjoyment to be found in familiarity, took the ephemerality of the comic magazine format, its 'close engagement with the passing topics of the moment' and 'successfully commodified it in the form of nostalgia': twenty years after the magazine first appeared, it was possible for readers to buy it in bound volumes with editorial comment explaining the 'jokes and fashions of the 1840s to the readers of the 1860s'.¹¹⁷ The *Strand* likewise enjoyed success partly for the impression of steadiness that it gave in a society that seemed to be altering radically at the end of the nineteenth century. Celebrating the magazine's first ten years, Newnes reflected that it had endured 'manifold and amazing changes, [...] most of which it was itself the cause', embracing the complexity involved in periodicals associated with modern publishing practice being presented as sources of constancy.¹¹⁸ David Finkelstein, meanwhile, attributes the increased sales of *Blackwood's* during the war to its continued resistance to change: it 'gained renewed vigour from maintaining the literary status quo'.¹¹⁹ The humour in First World War service-author stories that is associated, as has been seen, with resilience, calmness, and stoicism, reflects these images – or roles – of the magazines as being sources of stability and durability, the war as it appeared in their pages seeming to be one more disruption that could be laughed off.

Steadfastness and unconcern were thus not only associated with servicemen in short stories, but formed part of the wider publishing context in which the wartime narratives appeared. As I have been suggesting, the marketing and pre-1914 contents of popular periodicals were related to senses of stability. In particular, there is a large degree of continuity between ideas of British humour before and during the Great War, though the wartime discussion of such humour was more emphatically patriotic. The depictions of soldiers and military life that featured in service-author stories also reflected the style of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century special correspondents, and had a similar focus on comic misadventure in the military context to some humorous short stories published before 1914. These earlier stories, special correspondents' reports, marketing strategies, and discussion of national humour combined during the Great War to form the background to the idealised representations of soldierliness found in service-author tales. Maintaining a sense of humour was represented as a British, martial, and even war-winning quality. In this respect the stories generate the kind of laughing community described in Hobbes' and Scruton's superiority theories, with the latter's ideas in addition suggesting that self-deprecation in particular helps to form this kind of group. The formation of such communities necessarily involves a line being drawn between those who belong and those who do not, and British humour was exclusive to readers willing to accept it as an exercise in a privileged aspect of national identity that aided the war effort.

¹¹⁷ Leary, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Qtd. in Kate Jackson, p. 90.

¹¹⁹ Finkelstein, p. 108.

3.3 Alternative Humour: Saki and Wyndham Lewis.

Humour in First World War stories did not always function to construct pictures of stability and calmness, however, and texts in which humour creates more unsettling depictions of war experience provide counter-examples that both expand the scope of how humour worked in short fiction during the war and act as foils to the kinds of narrative already explored, casting light on the extent to which humour in texts from the *Strand*, *Punch*, *Blackwood's* and the *Daily Mail* served to create patriotic and often upbeat pictures of war experience. As Maunder points out, the most popular war stories were those that 'celebrated resistance to change, comradeship and the survival of the human spirit in a fairly unequivocal way, at the same time as acknowledging the very great dangers involved in fighting for one's country', a description that is a good summary of the stories discussed in this chapter so far.¹²⁰ The works below – Saki's 'Birds on the Western Front' (1915) and 'The Square Egg' (1915), and Lewis' 'Cattleman's Spring-Mate' (1917) and 'The French Poodle' (1916, written 1915) – diverge from this outlook.¹²¹ The Saki stories appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, which was owned by Newnes but was aimed at a narrower and more exclusive audience than the *Strand*.¹²² Lewis' stories were published in the radical *Little Review*, and the *Egoist*, both of which adopted some features of the popular, commercialised press, but which nevertheless had fairly small readerships.¹²³ Estimates for the circulation of the *Little Review* vary between 1,500 and 3,000, and the *Egoist's* readership of approximately 750 in 1915 had reduced to about 400 by 1919.¹²⁴ Certainly in the case of Lewis' stories, though less so in Saki's work, the narratives discussed in this section were thus published in less-popular and less profit-driven periodicals. Their humour helps to create discomfiting pictures of war experience, emphasising the conflict's strangeness and suggesting its capacity to alter servicemen not, as is implied in many service-author tales, in the sense of 'improving' their characters, but in the sense of dehumanising them.¹²⁵ This is more

¹²⁰ Maunder, 'Introduction', *British Literature*, p. li.

¹²¹ Lewis was born in Canada to an English mother and American father, and the *Little Review*, in which 'Cattleman's Spring-Mate' appeared, was an American publication. However, Lewis wrote the story in the U.K., and it was published while he was serving in the British army, though fragments of the tale were begun in 1915, before he enlisted. The spelling of 'Cattleman' varies. I use 'Cattleman' for consistency. Richard Cork, 'Lewis, [Percy] Wyndham [1882–1957]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2011 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34517>> [accessed 17 March 2017]; Einhaus, 'Lewis and War', in *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide*, ed. by Andrzej Gąsiorek and Nathan Waddell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2015), pp. 49–63 (p. 52).

¹²² A. J. A. Morris, *Reporting the First World War: Charles Repington, The Times and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), p. 17. The editor of the *Westminster Gazette*, J. A. Spender, actually complained in 1925 about New Journalism (like other members of the 'quality press') for its supposed exploitation of low taste (Jean Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998], p. 187).

¹²³ Mark Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905–1920* (Madison: Uni of Wisconsin Press, 2001), p. 85.

¹²⁴ Andrew Thacker, 'General Introduction: "Magazines, Magazines, Magazines!"', *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II, North America 1894–1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), pp. 1–27 (p. 17); Morrisson, pp. 149, 104; Paul Edwards, 'Futurism, Literature and the Market', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 132–51 (p. 145).

¹²⁵ 'Cattleman's Spring Mate' in fact caused the issue of the *Little Review* in which it appeared to be 'seized by the U.S. Post Office', which objected to its 'salacious' character. Geoff Gilbert, 'Shellshock, Anti-Semitism, and the Agency of the Avant-Garde', in *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War*, ed. by David Peters Corbett (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 78–98 (p. 86).

evident in Lewis' stories than in Saki's, since Saki's works evoke a sense that humour could be a means of enduring war – an attitude reminiscent of humour's function in the stories analysed above. Even so, as well as extending his earlier association with patriotic senses of Britishness, Saki's war stories also see his typically dark humour becoming in the context of war, at points, bleak and disturbing. In Lewis' war stories, drastically black, misanthropic satire reflects the views suggested by the 'Blasts' and 'Blesses' of 1914 and 1915, Lewis having praised this and condemned the kind of gentle and reassuring humour found in popular magazines. His stories involve a darker humour than even Hobbes or Descartes describes, since his satire does not entirely create a division between superior, laughing observer and an inferior object of ridicule, instead suggesting that war implicates humanity as a whole in that which is bestial. Lewis's work, and to an extent Saki's as well, shows commitment to challenging, ambiguous humour that presents far more cynical, troubling pictures of war experience than the optimistic impressions given by the other stories discussed.

The narrator of 'Birds on the Western Front' gives a lengthy description of his wartime environment via reference to the birdlife of the war zone. He begins with the proposition that despite the 'enormous economic dislocation which the war operations have caused', there is 'little corresponding disturbance in the bird life of the same districts', going on to detail the behaviour of specific birds with the manner of an amateur ornithologist.¹²⁶ In this respect the story shares a theme with jokes in the trench press about spotting birdlife while at the front, for instance the *Wipers Times* features disputes between correspondents over hearing the first cuckoo of spring.¹²⁷ Saki includes, for example, the information that 'Rats and mice have mobilised and swarmed into the fighting line, and there has been a partial mobilization of owls' who 'thin out their numbers'. There are, however, 'always sufficient mice left over to populate one's dug-out and make a parade-ground [...] of one's face at night'.¹²⁸ Two magpies have built their nest 'in the battered remnants of a poplar', the 'effect' of which 'rather suggested an archiepiscopal enthronement taking place in the ruined remains of Melrose Abbey'.¹²⁹ There are not as many rooks, crows, and ravens as 'might be expected in a war zone', but those which are present are not disturbed by the noise of the guns. They 'might have been in some peaceful English meadow', and 'future generations of small boys, employed in scaring rooks away [...] will have to invent something in the way of super-frightfulness to achieve their purpose'.¹³⁰ The skylark also remains undiscouraged: 'when nothing seemed alive except a few wary waterlogged sentries and many scuttling rats', the lark would 'dash skyward and pour forth a song of ecstatic jubilation that sounded horribly forced and insincere'.¹³¹ The text becomes unreservedly solemn in a description of a 'stricken wood', in which there is a 'wee hen-chaffinch' that is 'too scared to feed' its young but 'too

¹²⁶ Saki, 'Birds on the Western Front', *The Westminster Gazette* (1915), in *The Complete Works of Saki* (London: Bodley Head, 1987), pp. 545–48 (p. 545).

¹²⁷ See, for example, 'Correspondence', *Wipers Times*, 20 March 1916, in Westhorp, *Wipers Times*, p. 45.

¹²⁸ Saki, 'Birds', p. 545.

¹²⁹ Saki, 'Birds', p. 546.

¹³⁰ Saki, 'Birds', p. 546.

¹³¹ Saki, 'Birds', p. 547.

loyal to desert'. The narrator imagines the wounded wondering 'why anything having wings and no pressing reason for remaining should have chosen to stay in such a place'.¹³² The subject of game birds nevertheless gains a more wry note at the piece's close. The narrator comments that English gamekeepers have 'evolved a sort of religion as to the nervous debility of even the hardiest game birds', and that the birds of the war zone prove the idea wrong: 'Gamekeepers who are serving with the colours might seize the opportunity to indulge in a little useful nature study'.¹³³

'The Square Egg' opens with a similar account of the war environment, the narrator then moving on to describe his encounter with a 'purse-sapper' – a man who wants a loan. Saki begins with the assertion that 'Assuredly a badger is the animal that one most resembles in this trench warfare, that drab-coated creature of the twilight', adding that it is 'a pity' that 'we shall never know' what 'the badger thinks about life', but that 'it is difficult enough to know what one thinks about, oneself, in the trenches'. Such things as 'Parliament, taxes, social gatherings, economies, and expenditure, and all the [...] horrors of civilization seem immeasurably remote, and the war itself seems almost as distant and unreal'.¹³⁴ Not least strange is soldiers' lack of interest in the enemy: though 'It would not be advisable to forget [...] that they are there', he writes, 'one speculates little as to whether they are drinking warm soup and eating sausage'.¹³⁵ Much more pressing a concern is 'the mud that at times engulfs you as cheese engulfs a cheesemite [sic]'. Again, this passage involves a concern with animals: Saki's speaker notes 'In Zoological Gardens one has gazed at an elk or bison loitering at its pleasure more than knee-deep in a quagmire of greasy mud, and one has wondered what it would feel like', adding dryly, 'One knows now'.¹³⁶ He goes on to describe estaminets (cafés that provided food and alcohol), and to recount a chance meeting in one such establishment. A stranger tells him a tale of having selectively bred hens to lay square eggs, and of how the war forced him to leave the business to an aunt, who refuses to send him any profits. He asks for a loan, to which request the narrator responds by saying he will go and find the farm and, should the tale prove to be true, marry the aunt.¹³⁷

Not dissimilarly from those service-author tales in which civilian and military narratives are interwoven, Saki's personas in these two stories are presented as amateur soldiers, as civilians in uniform, with some humour emerging from the description of wartime life via the incongruous use of civilian reference points. 'Birds on the Western Front', for example, invites amusement from the way in which the speaker interprets his surroundings not via reference to the images of desolation and barrenness that are so often associated with the landscape of the First World War, but instead via what seems to be a hobby from civilian life – though, as is noted below, there is also a large degree of pathos involved in this. 'The Square Egg', meanwhile, often plays on contrasts between the war zone and

¹³² Saki, 'Birds', p. 547.

¹³³ Saki, 'Birds', p. 548.

¹³⁴ Saki, 'The Square Egg', *The Westminster Gazette* (1915), in *Complete Works*, pp. 539–44 (p. 539).

¹³⁵ Saki, 'Egg', p. 540.

¹³⁶ Saki, 'Egg', p. 540.

¹³⁷ Saki, 'Egg', pp. 542–44.

civilian frames of reference: Saki incorporates zoos, chicken houses, taverns, rules for children, and the trappings of civil and social life such as government and parties.¹³⁸ This ties-in with a view during the conflict, mentioned in relation to the error-prone soldiers of trench newspapers, that ‘British troops had always remained “citizens first”, never quite discarding a set of attitudes which distanced them from the profession of arms’.¹³⁹ To return to Kant’s framework, the stories invite momentary ‘enjoyment’ by presenting ‘something nonsensical’ in which ‘the understanding [...] can find no satisfaction’: we are encouraged to laugh at the senseless mismatch between the circumstances of war and the continuance of everyday life.¹⁴⁰

As with the poems discussed in Chapter One, such incongruity reflects onto the characterisation of those who encounter it, the narrators’ capacity to find humour in senseless circumstances according with the British, stoical humour described above. The ways in which Saki’s narrators adopt amusing tones to their bleak surroundings – the persona of an amateur ornithologist, the whimsical, ‘badger’s eye’ take on mud – create pictures of them as having some distance from military life, as maintaining the outlook they would have in peacetime. This resembles the kind of emotional detachment, already explored, that philosophers and commentators from Freud to Harvey see as one of the great advantages of humour, a sense of aloofness that means Saki participates in the unruffled, stoical, British humour found in many other service-author stories. In ‘Birds on the Western Front’, the narrator’s partially humorous commitment to bird watching suggests a mixture of steadfastness and amused self-awareness, while the self-assured flippancy of the speaker in ‘The Square Egg’ indicates a similar refusal to allow war experience to have a negative emotional impact. Indeed, Saki was often concerned in his writing with, in Sandie Byrne’s words, ‘England, in an idealised form’, and his wartime stories are no exception, such idealisation blending with his use of British insouciance.¹⁴¹ His advice to ‘English gamekeepers’ in ‘Birds on the Western Front’ especially merges detached humorousness with national idealisation, since this guidance links the landscape of the front with the kind of romanticised, rural English setting in which gamekeepers might be found.

The humour in both stories continues from Saki’s pre-1914 tales. Saki’s response to the war has been criticised as conservative in its patriotism, as moving away from the mischievous subversion seen in his earlier writing. His wartime narrators do, though, have elements of the rebellious humour associated with his pre-war protagonists, which earlier characters in addition anticipate Saki’s support for the British war effort. Brian Gibson suggests that the invasion novel *When William Came* (1913), is ‘much less funny’ than Saki’s previous work, introducing a new seriousness to Saki’s writing: he links the novel to Munro (in his view the conservative, ‘jingoistic’ author) ‘disavowing’ the ‘dissident’ character types prominent in earlier stories (which characters Gibson associates with the rebellious

¹³⁸ Saki, ‘Egg’, pp. 541, 539.

¹³⁹ Fuller, p. 159.

¹⁴⁰ Kant, p. 209.

¹⁴¹ Byrne, p. 15.

persona Saki).¹⁴² As has been seen, the two wartime narratives discussed do have a patriotic slant, but this does not entirely obscure the insouciance both narrators also exhibit, reflecting that of the dandy-like characters that Gibson praises; this is true of the narrator in ‘The Square Egg’ especially. Byrne argues that Saki’s male characters before 1914 are never ‘weak-willed or cowardly’, instead having ‘physical and intellectual courage and the ability to maintain self-control in the face of danger’. These qualities, she says, combined with the ‘love of England’ they show, ‘make it not implausible that the Saki youths would put aside the pleasures of wardrobe and palate to fight for their country’.¹⁴³ The ‘Saki youths’ in uniform would in this sense reflect the rare cases seen elsewhere in service-author stories of men becoming soldiers without relinquishing their knut-like characteristics, such as Sapper’s character James (of the silk breeches).

As suggested by the summaries above, Saki’s wartime stories also involve darker subjects and tones. The concluding advice to gamekeepers in ‘Birds on the Western Front’ has a knowing facetiousness that is also full of pathos: there is an impression of the speaker clinging to his peacetime hobby; he seems to be more suited to bird watching than warfare. Indeed, his intense interest in birds suggests great sensitivity to and love of nature that seems not to suit his status as a soldier. The birds being surrounded by the circumstances of the war serves as a metaphor for the narrator himself: the war seems to have intruded on his normal peacetime life, the birds being ‘civilians’ in the midst of war just as he is a civilian in uniform. There is an element of Fussellian irony here, the pastoral being used to suggest the conflict’s ‘calamities’.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, the description of the mud in ‘The Square Egg’ involves a humorous, but also unsettling, incongruity between the narrator’s light, whimsical tenor and the object of description: when ‘bit[ing] muddy biscuits with muddy teeth, then at least you are in a position to understand thoroughly what it feels like to wallow – on the other hand the bison’s idea of pleasure becomes more and more incomprehensible’.¹⁴⁵ Kant’s incongruity theory of humour, as explained in Chapter One, is ambiguous when it comes to whether having the reason challenged is a pleasurable experience, and here readers are at once encouraged to be amused by the incongruities and *mundus inversus* that Saki presents but, like the playfulness and topsy-turviness in Rosenberg’s ‘Break of Day’, there is a sense of unease as well.¹⁴⁶ The pictures created are of speakers who are insouciant and resilient but also pathetic and bemused, surrounded by circumstances that are, as in the poetry discussed earlier, absurd, strange, distorted versions of normal life.

Saki’s wartime depiction of the relationship between man and nature in particular creates a mixture of amusement and disquiet, with zoomorphised servicemen having a blackly comical aspect reminiscent of the human-animal reversals that occur in several of the poems analysed and in Saki’s earlier work as well. Saki’s descriptions often involve playfulness with the lines between human and

¹⁴² Brian Gibson, *Reading Saki: The Fiction of H. H. Munro* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2014), pp. 8–9, 19.

¹⁴³ Byrne, p. 11.

¹⁴⁴ Fussell, p. 235.

¹⁴⁵ Saki, ‘Egg’, p. 540.

¹⁴⁶ Kant, p. 209.

animal. In ‘Birds on the Western Front’ there is a ‘mobilization’ of owls, a ‘pair of crows’ engage ‘in hot combat with a pair of sparrow hawks’ directly underneath ‘two Allied planes’ fighting enemy aircraft, and ‘waterlogged sentries’ are placed in the same category as ‘scuttling rats’.¹⁴⁷ In ‘The Square Egg’, the narrator explicitly likens himself to a badger, a ‘cheesemite’, and an ‘elk or bison’, while servicemen make ‘trench-to-billet migration[s]’, and become in the ‘khaki-clad, be-putteed throng’ of their ‘own kind’ as ‘unobtrusive as a green caterpillar on a green cabbage leaf’, and the ‘purse-sapper’ has ‘the aspect of a foraging crow’.¹⁴⁸ The intrusion of the animal world on the human here in part resembles Saki’s darkly comic depiction of animals in his pre-1914 stories. Good illustrations include: ‘Gabriel Ernest’ (1909), the homoerotic, eponymous hero of which eventually eats several children as part of the story’s final, black joke; and ‘Sredni Vashtar’ (1911), in which a young boy’s polecat-ferret kills (or is imagined to kill) his owner’s overbearing guardian. ‘Dogged’ (1899), ‘Tobermory’ (1909), and ‘The Music on the Hill’ (1911) all also involve reminders that humans would do well to be respectful of nature and animals in particular.¹⁴⁹ However, the representation of the relationship between humans and the natural world in the war stories is more disquieting than in the earlier narratives. ‘Birds on the Western Front’ especially, for example, shows humans destroying the landscape in ways that would in Saki’s pre-1914 stories have earned them a swift, darkly comic comeuppance. Saki’s humour may be too black to make us laugh out loud in the bodily, Kantian sense, and the absence of such physical oscillation may obstruct amusement, or make it difficult to overcome the initial discomfort of being presented with incongruities that defeat reason.¹⁵⁰ His representations of warfare imbue the conflict with an unsettling tragi-comedy.

Two war stories by Lewis – ‘Cantleman’s Spring Mate’ and ‘The French Poodle’ – involve an even bleaker, satirical, perspective on the relationship between humans, animals, and warfare. The former is the tale of an officer, Cantleman, who notes the effects of springtime: ‘The horses considered the mares immensely appetising masses of quivering flesh’, and the ‘sow [...] gave a sharp grunt of sex-hunger’, behaviour presented with dark comedy since this ‘mutual admiration society’ showed ‘their fondness for their neighbour in an embarrassing way’ – they ‘killed and ate them’.¹⁵¹ Cantleman is reminded of a ‘girl’, Stella, whom he has seen in the village: ‘the animal fullness of the child-bearing hips’, an ‘eye as innocent as the bird or the beast’, the ‘way in which Stella’s hips stood out [...] had the amplitude and flatness of a mare’.¹⁵² He presents her with a ring and then ‘devour[s]’ his ‘mate’. After he has returned to the front, he ignores a letter informing him that she is pregnant.¹⁵³ ‘The French

¹⁴⁷ Saki, ‘Birds’, pp. 545–47.

¹⁴⁸ Saki, ‘Egg’, p. 541.

¹⁴⁹ Saki, ‘Gabriel Ernest’, *Westminster Gazette*, 29 May 1909, in *Complete Works*, pp. 63–69; Saki, ‘Sredni Vashtar’, *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911), in *Complete Works*, pp. 136–40; Saki, ‘Dogged’, *St. Paul’s Magazine*, 18 February 1899; Saki, ‘Tobermory’, *Westminster Gazette*, 27 November 1909, in *Complete Works*, pp. 108–15; Saki, ‘The Music on the Hill’, *The Chronicles of Clovis* (1911), in *Complete Works*, pp. 161–66.

¹⁵⁰ Kant, pp. 209–10.

¹⁵¹ Lewis, ‘Cantleman’s Spring-Mate’, *The Little Review*, 4 (1917), 8–14 (p. 8).

¹⁵² Lewis, ‘Cantleman’, pp. 9, 12.

¹⁵³ Lewis, ‘Cantleman’, pp. 13–14.

Poodle', meanwhile, centres on a servicemen, Rob Cairns, who is on leave because he is 'full of anxiety' after 'finding himself blown into the air'.¹⁵⁴ Cairns reads a lot of natural history, finding that the 'lives of animals seemed to have a great fascination'.¹⁵⁵ He becomes attached to the idea that humans 'suffered' from the absence of animals, and buys a French Poodle of which he becomes 'excessively fond'.¹⁵⁶ He does not want to take the dog with him to the front in case the pet is 'shot there', and so shoots the dog himself in order to prevent its death in war. Afterwards he 'lurched round, face downwards, [...] and sobbed in a deep howling way', resembling a dog.¹⁵⁷

Lewis' stories have a strong satirical element in the Juvenalian sense, with his depictions bringing out beast-like qualities in his characters. Unlike Saki's portrayal of humans and animals in the war zone, for Lewis the war has a brutalising effect on humans that is to be treated with Hobbesian derision rather than endured with sangfroid. Cattleman, Stella, and Cairns all resemble animals in ways that elicit disgust, and in this sense the stories participate in a long-standing literary tradition of putting human-animal reversals to satirical purposes: Critchley cites as examples the work of Jonathan Swift, George Orwell, Franz Kafka, and Will Self.¹⁵⁸ This tradition is at play in the rat poems discussed in Chapter One, and in Lewis' work it takes on a darker form than that found even in Rosenberg's 'Break of Day'. Cairns in 'The French Poodle' believes that separation from animals makes humans become more bestial themselves: 'When there are no patient backs of beasts to receive their blows men turn them more towards their fellows'. Cairns wonders 'whether the savagery we arrive at were better than the savagery we come from'.¹⁵⁹ In addition, the way in which he becomes dog-like after shooting his pet seems to be a comment on the dehumanising effects of war, and in particular on the impact that shell shock could have.¹⁶⁰ Cattleman, meanwhile, as Einhaus identifies, is 'part of the animal kingdom, in which war constitutes not an aberration, but merely a parallel to the merciless natural environment that he observes in the English countryside'.¹⁶¹ Stella is 'a sort of Whizzbang. With a treachery worthy of a Hun, Nature tempted him towards her', and Cattleman decides to 'throw back Stella where she was discharged from' – as soldiers did bombs – since 'all women were contaminated with Nature's hostile power and might be treated as spies or enemies'.¹⁶² When Cattleman 'beat[s] a German's brains out', he does so 'with the same impartial malignity' with which he treated 'his Spring-mate', and is said to have 'no adequate realization of the extent to which, evidently, the death of a Hun was to the advantage

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, 'The French Poodle', *The Egoist*, 3 (1916), 39–41 (p. 39).

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, 'Poodle', *Egoist*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, 'Poodle', *Egoist*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁷ Lewis, 'Poodle', *Egoist*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁸ Critchley, pp. 30–31.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, 'Poodle', *Egoist*, p. 40.

¹⁶⁰ The narrative speaks to the sense in Lewis' wider oeuvre that, in his conception of shell shock, the 'repression of trauma [...] negates the possibility of being more than matter or automaton', which reduction of humans to 'things' Lewis theorised in 1927 as provoking laughter (as discussed below). Edwards, 'Wyndham Lewis and the Uses of Shellshock: Meat and Postmodernism', in *Wyndham Lewis and the Culture of Modernity*, ed. by Gąsiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Waddell (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), pp. 223–40 (p. 233).

¹⁶¹ Einhaus, 'Lewis and War', p. 53.

¹⁶² Lewis, 'Cattleman', p. 13.

of the animal world'.¹⁶³ Moreover, laughter in 'Cantleman's Spring Mate' is explicitly linked to the animal, becoming associated with fluidity between human and beast. Cantleman laughs when contemplating his animalistic attraction to Stella (when he describes her hips, as already noted, as having 'animal fullness' and her eyes as like those of a 'bird or beast', he 'laughed without shame or pleasure'); and he also laughs when feeling 'miserable' at the thought of his own death, which he sees as a desire to stay amongst animals ('he again laughed, a similar sound to that that the girl had caused.= For what was he unhappy about? He wanted to remain amongst his fellow insects and beasts'). Elsewhere, he compares his own laugh to 'the pig's grunt and the bird's cough' and, meeting Stella for the last time, 'grinned up towards [a nightingale], and once more turned to the devouring of his mate'.¹⁶⁴

Lewis' depiction of his characters' wartime behaviour to an extent invites the kind of amusement described in Hobbes' and Descartes' superiority theories. His stories might be read as involving, in Descartes' words, 'Derision or mockery' in the form of 'joy mingled with hatred, which stems from perception of some trivial evil in a person we think deserves it' – with the qualification that the 'evil' he identifies is not 'trivial', but rather what Lewis presents as war's capacity to reveal human brutality.¹⁶⁵ Even though Lewis' work is highly satirical, however, the stories are more complex than simply offering readers a sense of superiority to Cantleman and Cairns. The implication of the tales is that the threat of dehumanisation presented by the war is far-reaching, that it may extend to all whom the war touches. Readers are less invited to feel pleasure in their superiority to Lewis' characters, and more asked to contemplate how they themselves may be implicated in the conflict's effects – or, at least, to contemplate the uncomfortable idea that the privileged figures of servicemen may not be superior after all, but rather brought low by their involvement in the war. Lewis' satire here in other words reflects what Lisa Colletta describes as 'Modernist dark humor', a kind of satire that involves 'deeply ambivalent humor': it 'offers none of the optimism of conventional social satire that suggests correction of vice'.¹⁶⁶

Some of Lewis' own comments on the nature of humour help to elucidate the satire in his two war stories discussed here. In 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (1927), Lewis argues that 'all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*'. Working from the assumption that humans should be seen by convention as bodies, he claims that it is recognising the thing-like in humans that prompts a kind of dark, disquieting laughter 'of the nature of a thunderbolt'.¹⁶⁷ The satire in 'Cantleman's Spring Mate' and 'The French Poodle' arises from Lewis' emphasis on characters' thing-like or animalistic qualities: Cantleman's behaviour makes him appear as little more than a bestial body, and Cairns' attachment to (and eventual killing of) his dog reveals an affinity between himself and the animal. The place of the corporeal and animalistic in Lewis' satire can, in fact,

¹⁶³ Lewis, 'Cantleman', p. 14.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis, 'Cantleman', pp. 9, 10, 13.

¹⁶⁵ Descartes, p. 268.

¹⁶⁶ Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Lewis, 'Meaning of the Wild Body', in *The Wild Body* (1927) (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 156–60 (p. 158). This reverses the Bergsonian view of humour, according to which humour emerges from people behaving in a mechanical manner, or 'persons' behaving as 'things'.

be traced to his war experience. Paul Edwards writes that ‘Where exactly we are to draw the line between seeing ourselves as “meat” and as people is ‘one that the First World War has made difficult to fix’, arguing that the connections Lewis makes in his theory of laughter between ‘persons’ and ‘things’ was influenced by his experience in the war of humans’ corporeality.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, the bleak, shocking quality to the satire that rests on such tensions reflects the style of humour that Lewis famously advocates in *Blast*. He ‘blasted’ humour – ‘Quack English drug for stupidity and sleepiness. | Arch enemy of the REAL, conventionalizing’ – but also ‘blessed’ ‘ENGLISH HUMOUR’ as a ‘barbarous weapon’, including Swift’s ‘solemn bleak | wisdom of laughter’ and the ‘separating, ungregarious | BRITISH GRIN’.¹⁶⁹ Likewise, the 1915 ‘War Number’ saw Lewis criticise ‘the famous English “sense of Humour”’, calling it a worse enemy than Germany: if, Lewis claims, the ‘Englishman’ had ‘sufficient moral courage’ to ‘make use of his Grin’, he would ‘find life much more difficult’, but also be a ‘finer fellow’; ‘Jokes’, he says, should be ‘taxed in England like opium in China’.¹⁷⁰ He thus privileges biting, dark, incisive humour and derides its more comfortable counterpart, which is characterised as obfuscating.

As might be expected of an author who thrived on registering and attempting to create disruption and challenge, Lewis’ satirical representations of the war in ‘Cattleman’s Spring Mate’ and ‘The French Poodle’ emphasise and invite disquiet; they contrast, as do Saki’s two stories (to a lesser degree), the more patriotic, optimistic, non-challenging humour found in the majority of war stories. Saki’s narratives do have elements of the patriotic sangfroid found in the service-author stories addressed in the first section of this chapter, as well as showing continued concerns with a patriotic, idealised conception of the nation: as with British humour, they contribute to a sense of a community of laughers of the kind Scruton in particular describes. However, a large degree of pathos complicates and tempers his humour, especially with regard to the parallels he draws between servicemen and animals. These parallels create more unsettling manifestations of the black humour that Saki generated via reference to human-animal relationships in his pre-1914 stories, and are more difficult to interpolate into a picture of the war as simply requiring humour and bravery than are moments in other service-author stories in which war experience becomes solemn. Similarly, and most strikingly when viewed in light of his theoretical comments on humour, Lewis’ works also provide counter-perspectives on the reassuring, British humour found in most of the stories considered in this chapter. In ‘Cattleman’s Spring Mate’ and ‘The French Poodle’, war is seen to reveal the animalistic qualities in the soldier-protagonists, revolving around satire that goes beyond Hobbesian or Cartesian ridicule: this is satire that does not simply come from feelings of superiority, but implicates the laughter themselves in the dehumanising effects of war. Saki’s and Lewis’ works thus present alternative kinds of service-author humour. Nevertheless, their perspectives on war experience are the exception rather than the rule, indicating the

¹⁶⁸ Edwards, ‘Wyndham Lewis’, pp. 232–33.

¹⁶⁹ Lewis, ‘Manifesto’, *Blast*, 1 (1914), 11–45 (pp. 17, 26).

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, ‘Constantinople Our Star’, *Blast*, 1 (1915), p. 11.

importance of the more common style of comic war stories. The large number of quite formulaic works in which humour contributes to propagandistic, patriotic and narrowly British senses of identity and belonging were far more prevalent.

3.4 ‘If a man brings us a joke, we require to be satisfied of its durability’: Conclusions.¹⁷¹

The kind of humour found in popular magazines generally prevailed in short stories over that which was darker and which created pictures of the war as disturbing. An aspect of wartime cultural mobilisation, this lighter, pervasive kind of humour was part of a patriotic, supposedly martial and British attitude to the conflict. The narrators and characters that feature in the service-author narratives discussed in the first part of this chapter are portrayed as having the capacity to maintain a sense of humour during the war and to be in possession of inner, sometimes hidden, strength or ‘grit’. Humour in these tales is depicted as a commendable reaction to warfare, reflecting the affirmative, idealised, and exclusive notions of martial masculinity and British identity that were articulated elsewhere in national periodicals. ‘British’ humour was presented as unique, incomprehensible to members of different nations, and extremely admirable, even being lauded as war-winning. The marketing of the periodicals, meanwhile, emphasised the idea that humour could connect members of the nation, including forming supportive links between non-combatants and servicemen. Part of the pleasure the stories invite is of belonging to a community of laughers, as in Hobbes’ and Scruton’s theories, with Scruton’s concept of a laughter that brings groups together by ‘lowering’ them in addition indicating why it might be that self-deprecating humour works so well as a means of fostering fellowship. On the reverse side of humour’s capacity to form groups in this manner lies the question of who is excluded from the circle of British laughers: this was an amusement that worked in the service of a patriotic, imperialistic, and even jingoistic, outlook on the conflict, an outlook according to which stoicism and sangfroid, rather than resistance or questioning, was called for in answer to the war, and that assumed the existence and desirability of a single definition of Britishness. Saki’s and Lewis’ stories, to different extents, counter this generic trend and the patriotic, optimistic kind of humour it fostered. Though Saki does use his humour to contribute to a picture of stereotypically British (or English) stoicism, this is accompanied by the disquieting notes of his black humour. Lewis’ satire, meanwhile, corresponds with his attacks elsewhere on exactly the kind of humour found in many popular war narratives. His satire is not a matter of feeling superior to risible objects of laughter external to ourselves, but is uncomfortable because it suggests that war may offer no escape from dehumanisation.

The humorous war stories considered and the periodicals in which they appeared show large degrees of continuity with their pre-war counterparts, aligning with the robustness of humorous literature and its techniques identified in previous chapters. The emergence of mass, commercialised journalism in the nineteenth century helped to foster an exclusive sense of national identity, appearing

¹⁷¹ Emanuel, ‘A Note on British Wit and Humour’, p. 422.

to be able to put readers in contact with each other by the contemplation of and contribution to their shared press. The treatment and use of 'British' humour in the majority of the war stories discussed is a legacy of this effect with, as has been seen, editors and writers often explicitly and self-consciously seeking to encourage shared feelings of national belonging and patriotism amongst readers. Humorous tales in military contexts and ideas about national humour that appeared before 1914 were, in addition, the forerunners of First World War service-author stories, with the marketing of popular magazines as points of stability and the reporting style of special correspondents also feeding into the nature and associations of humour in the wartime tales. As has been seen, the traditions of nonsense literature resurface in representations of conflict experience as comically absurd in Great War poetry, and machine-age humour contributed to the depiction of comically inept servicemen and minute military regulation in trench newspapers. In the short stories of the mainstream press, the association, in particular, of insouciant humour with Britishness continued to be relevant, and in fact became more emphatic, during the years of the First World War. Commenting in 1901 on the ubiquity of comic periodicals, Emanuel of the *Pall Mall Magazine* asked 'What of British wit and humour?', and suggested, playfully, that comic papers had a 'British quality' of a 'splendid regard for tradition', containing at the start of the twentieth century the 'same jokes' as appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth, and there is some truth in his remark.¹⁷² As well as reflecting Emanuel's conservative take on the nature of Britishness, the war stories reflect the style, topics, and notions of humour that had developed in the nineteenth century, once again suggesting the durability of humour, and the capacity of humorous writing and ideals of humour to be adapted to the representation of the conflict.

¹⁷² Emanuel, 'A Note on British Wit and Humour', pp. 421, 422.

Chapter Four: Theatre

Humour and Provocation in Portrayals of Home-Front Experiences

Fears that Shaw's *O'Flaherty V.C.* (written 1915), a satirical take on the fraught subject of recruitment in Ireland, could cause unrest if debuted in Dublin meant that its first staging took place not at the Abbey Theatre, as had been planned, but in Treizennes, France, in February 1917 by officers of the 40th Squadron, R.F.C.¹ *O'Flaherty V.C.* contains the argument that 'no war is right', puts forward the suggestion that life in Ireland is sufficiently unpleasant as to make enlistment a good alternative, and depicts recruiters lying about their battlefield exploits.² Such contents, combined with the sensitive political situation and Shaw's reputation as a radical anti-war writer meant that W. F. Bailey, trustee of the Abbey Theatre, objected to the text before even reading it thoroughly.³ The Treizennes performance suggests the play was 'safe' enough to be acted by those whom Shaw presented as victims of recruitment rhetoric, yet sufficiently provocative to necessitate containment in a controlled military space.⁴ Indeed, the production was partly a propagandistic display: Shaw was in the audience, having been invited to the front by Field Marshal Douglas Haig as part of a government scheme of establishing the support of prominent writers.⁵ Shaw was given a first-hand demonstration of how his supposedly incendiary critique could be harmless, and perhaps this absurdity accounts for a (possibly apocryphal) report that he laughed the whole way through.⁶

Wartime theatre involved complex interactions between the perspectives included in plays, playwrights' reputations, censorship, and audience demographics. This chapter elucidates humour's place in such exchanges. The humour in the plays discussed is central to ambiguities they present between that which is safe and that which is provocative.⁷ Both censors and playwrights recognised that comic treatment of risqué or taboo topics, or topics that had the potential to be controversial, was less inflammatory – less likely to attract censorship or audience disapproval – than solemn treatment of similar subjects.⁸ This raises a number of questions about the effect of humour on the wartime stage:

¹ John Ervine, 'At the Play: The Secret History of *O'Flaherty, V.C.*', *Observer*, 12 December 1920, p. 11; Lauren Arrington, 'The Censorship of *O'Flaherty V.C.*', *The Annual of George Bernard Shaw Studies*, 28 (2008), 85–106 (pp. 89–91). For a discussion of the report of Shaw's laughter, see: David Gunby, 'The First Night of *O'Flaherty, V.C.*', *Shaw and History*, 19 (1999), 85–98 (pp. 86–87, 89–90, 96).

² George Bernard Shaw, *O'Flaherty V. C.* (1915), in *Heartbreak House, Great Catherine, and Playlets of the War* (London: Constable and Company, 1919), pp. 163–90 (pp. 174, 189–90, 171).

³ Arrington, pp. 88–89.

⁴ 'Safe' denotes that which is not controversial or offensive, conservatism and conformity to the status quo.

⁵ Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw Volume II: 1898–1918: The Pursuit of Power* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 371; Gary Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992), p. 191.

⁶ Gunby, pp. 89–90.

⁷ I use 'provocative' to mean that which could create negative emotions, though amusement is itself an emotional provocation.

⁸ Plays intended for public performance were submitted to censors at the Lord Chamberlain's office (Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900–1968, Volume One: 1900–1932* [Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003], pp. 3–4). I use 'censor' and 'reader' interchangeably, but it is more accurate to think of their work as licensing. The reader G. S. Street was especially progressive (Nicholson, 'Getting Away With It: Strategies and Practice, 1902–1944', in *The Lord Chamberlain*

whether potentially contentious, serious topics can still be considered provocative once treated humorously, whether playwrights used humour to ‘sneak’ inflammatory ideas and subjects past censors, and whether humour actually made potentially provocative topics less incendiary. Examining these issues is also enlightening for understanding where the boundaries of acceptability for comedies were during the war, how different types of humour affected plays’ receptions, and what roles generic conventions and authors’ reputations had in shaping reactions to performances.

I argue that humour in Great War theatre involves tensions at emotional and political levels: it holds in balance that which has the potential to be emotionally provocative and politically controversial with that which is placatory and politically conservative. This balance is fitted to the contested space of the theatre: censors sought to prevent controversy and subversion; theatre managers had to consider commerciality; audience members pursued different kinds of amusement, relaxation, and stimulation; and playwrights discussed the issues of the day from diverse perspectives, variously aiming to entertain, move, and challenge. The plays discussed here largely offer conservative perspectives on controversial subjects, with humour working to make potentially incendiary subjects less inflammatory. Humour frequently acts as a corrective, encouraging support for the war effort, and invites mild emotional responses (amusement, levity), rather than such reactions as anger or offence. However, while the innocuous treatment of potentially controversial subjects often means that these can no longer be considered incendiary, the reverse perspective is also important: it might not be credible to consider humour as entirely innocent if it facilitates the discussion of topics and outlooks that may not have been staged if treated more solemnly. The plays below depict experiences and contain themes that were politically and socially contentious, and portray elements of wartime life that could be emotionally disturbing. At times, more solemnly expressed unorthodox ideas appear in plays that were otherwise humorous, with outwardly innocuous comic contexts ‘sneaking’ contested perspectives into scripts. Humour in the plays, moreover, frequently creates senses of near-infraction: there was fun to be had in obfuscating the issue of what was meant to be taken seriously.

Freud’s approach to the ways in which humour may facilitate expressions of the taboo and assuage negative emotions underpins the analysis in this chapter of how humour in wartime theatre functioned, with Ngai’s theory of aesthetic emotion – her work on what she terms ‘ugly feelings’ – in addition elucidating the responses that plays invited and received. Both Freud’s and Ngai’s ideas help to explain how plays invite amusement, and what such invitations suggest about war experience and its representation. Freud’s view that tendentious jokes save energy that would have been spent on repression suggests that audiences may enjoy humour partly because it allows them to confront and find

Regrets... A History of British Theatre Censorship, ed. by Dominic Shellard, Steve Nicholson, and Miriam Handley [London: British Library, 2004], pp. 57–130 [p. 65]). The licensing system may have facilitated alternative dramas being staged (Richard Findlater, *Banned: A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* [London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1967], p. 130). Plays, nevertheless, would not be licensed if they were ‘indecent’, encouraged crime, impaired foreign relations, or would cause ‘a breach of the peace’ (Nicholson, ‘Getting Away’, p. 63).

pleasure in subjects and feelings that would otherwise be repressed.⁹ His idea that humour at times acts as a means of replacing negative emotion with more pleasurable feelings, moreover, combined with Ngai's suggestion that some kinds of feelings block or thwart political action, indicates why it might be that humorous plays were more likely to make it past the censors unscathed.¹⁰ Playwrights' use of humour guarded against the strong responses – offence, disorder – that censors sought to prevent. Indeed, Freud drew parallels between psychological censorship in the form of repression and acts of political censorship of the kind performed by the Lord Chamberlain's office, as is explained below.

Audience response is especially important in relation to Great War theatre because, at the time of the conflict, dramatic performance was thought of as a particularly 'dangerous' kind of artwork, in the sense of being especially likely to stimulate strong feeling and even unrest, with humorous drama being seen as an exception to this. Plays were believed to have the capacity to do more harm than other types of literature because they were a public form of art, with prominent figures in politics and the arts asserting that the company of other people made theatre likely to prompt strong reactions. One reason given in support of theatre licensing to the 1909 Joint Select Committee on Stage Plays was that 'people's behaviour and actions could be significantly changed by what they saw in the theatre', and censors had to consider whether performances might encourage rash or violent action that powerful feelings may provoke.¹¹ As a *Times* commentator proposed, certain plays produced during a 'time of political stress' would 'not be dangerous' if read alone, but the 'effect on a crowd in a theatre might incite them to pillage, to go out and burn the city'.¹² As touched on above in relation to Freud's and Ngai's ideas, however, potentially inflammatory subjects were often allowed in comic pieces: 'the censorship was more lenient towards the light and frivolous than towards the thoughtful and intelligent'.¹³ Lord Sandhurst (Lord Chamberlain 1912–1921) commented in 1918 that 'well-written plays' were 'worse' than 'light' ones, the jokes in the latter having a 'passing' impact, while the 'effect of the more thoughtful plays may be more lasting'.¹⁴ Reviews of performances in the press, alongside censors' reports from the Lord Chamberlain's collection at the British Library, help to assess audience response, though there remains the difficulty that theatre prompts different reactions from individuals in the same audience.¹⁵ The reports are especially valuable, since they are composed by professional readers who examined texts with the question of their likely provocativeness in mind.

By revealing the mechanisms by which humour challenged taboos, Freudian readings help to challenge previous scholarship on Great War theatre, which focuses on how the stage became more conservative during the conflict. Sos Eltis demonstrates that pre-war engagement with feminist concerns gave way with the onset of hostilities to 'light relief' and 'escape', a change she attributes partly to some

⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 103.

¹⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 230–32.

¹¹ Nicholson, *Censorship*, pp. 297, 5–6, 56–7; Arrington, p. 96.

¹² Qtd. in Nicholson, *Censorship*, pp. 56–7.

¹³ Nicholson, 'Getting Away', p. 66.

¹⁴ Qtd. in Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 115.

¹⁵ Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 5.

playwrights who previously wrote ‘socially engaged realist drama’, including Barrie and Galsworthy, being recruited to the War Propaganda Bureau.¹⁶ L. J. Collins explains that during the conflict, ‘the stage became an unofficial organ of the government’ by ‘stimulating patriotism’, raising money, and providing entertainment for servicemen.¹⁷ Richard Findlater argues that ‘the serious drama vanished almost completely’, theatre being ‘given up to light entertainment’, none of which presented ‘the least moral, social, or political problem’ to the censors.¹⁸ In contrast to this latter view especially, Maunder has drawn attention to the diversity of the wartime stage, including listing plays that diverge from the trend towards conservatism.¹⁹ Even so, he comments that playwrights ‘failed to capture’ the conflict with the ‘truthful[ness]’ of trench poetry, and that there was ‘a widespread’ feeling that ‘hardly any’ playwrights wrote about it in a ‘meaningful sense’.²⁰ The idea that drama during the war was politically and artistically wanting has sometimes led to it being overlooked, reflecting critical preferences identified elsewhere in this thesis for literature perceived to dispute wartime orthodoxies. Thomas Postlewait, for instance, notes that during the war ‘alternative theatre staled’, before moving on to discuss music hall, while Fussell identifies references to theatricality in discussions of the war rather than examining plays themselves.²¹ Heinz Kosok’s and Gordon Williams’ histories of wartime theatre do include overviews of comic drama, though not thorough analyses of humour.²² As I will show, wartime theatre often presented propagandistic perspectives, and tended not to highlight the conflict’s destructive effects. Paying detailed attention to humorous war plays reveals, however, the nuances of the amusement they offer and of their portrayals of the war. In addition, I take account of the continuities between pre-war and wartime drama, rather than seeing the start of the conflict as bringing a sudden break – a sudden move towards conventionality – demonstrating how established uses of humour contributed to the depiction of conflict experience.

The plays included in this chapter were part of a highly diverse and lively theatrical world. There were full professional performances, revues, variety theatre, sketches, musical comedy, amateur drama, pantomime, melodrama, charity plays, Shakespeare productions (multiplied by the 1916 tercentenary of his death), new and translated work, theatre for servicemen overseas, and dramatic works by troops and

¹⁶ Sos Eltis, ‘From Sex-War to Factory Floor: Theatrical Depictions of Women’s Work during the First World War’, in Maunder, *British Theatre*, pp. 103–20 (pp. 110, 104). For Barrie’s and Galsworthy’s wartime activities, see: Lisa Chaney, *Hide-and-Seek With Angels* (London: Hutchinson, 2005), p. 304; Catherine Dupré, *John Galsworthy* (London: Collins, 1976), pp. 210–13, 223–24. There are grounds for contemplating the extent to which the Lord Chamberlain’s office was needed during the conflict given that provocative playwrights ‘cheerfully committed themselves’ to war-supporting views (Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 118). Even Shaw (claimed) to have avoided writing anything that would impede morale (A. M. Gibbs, ed., *Shaw: Interviews and Recollections* [London: The Macmillan Press, 1990], p. 252).

¹⁷ L. J. Collins, ‘The Function of Theatre Entertainment in the First World War, 1914–1918’ (Royal Holloway, University of London, 1994), p. 4.

¹⁸ Findlater, p. 125.

¹⁹ Maunder, ‘Introduction: Rediscovering First World War Theatre’, *British Theatre*, pp. 9–10.

²⁰ Maunder, ‘Theatre: 1914 and After’, in Baxter and Einhaus, pp. 62, 64.

²¹ Thomas Postlewait, ‘The London Stage, 1895–1918’, in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3: Since 1895*, ed. by Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 34–59 (p. 54); Fussell, pp. 191–203.

²² Heinz Kosok, *The Theatre of War: The First World War in British and Irish Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 147–151; Gordon Williams, pp. 18–71, 72–91, 92–146).

prisoners of war.²³ Touring companies performed throughout Britain, with repertory theatres established in several cities before 1914.²⁴ Seasons of New Drama, characterised by social, moral, and political engagement and artistic innovation, had in the first decade of the twentieth century seen playwrights develop performances outside the restraints of more commercialised production.²⁵ Audiences were diverse, as were the subjects of wartime dramas, as a brief look at the titles of plays submitted for licensing indicates (figure 17).²⁶ Attempts to show the war's most solemn aspects were not always popular, and by 1916 audiences tired of official films depicting the war zone, preferring comedies such as *The Better 'Ole* (1918).²⁷ *The Era* even suggested that embracing comedy was a way to mimic servicemen's supposed cheerfulness.²⁸

²³ Dave Russell, 'Varieties of Life: The Making of the Edwardian Music Hall', in *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, ed. by Michael Booth and Joel Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), pp. 61–85 (p. 70); Katharine Cockin, 'Edith Craig and the Pioneer Players: London's International Art Theatre in a "Khaki-Clad and Khaki-Minded World"', in Maunder, *British Theatre*, pp. 121–39; Lena Ashwell, 'Concerts at the Front', *The Musical Herald*, 1 February 1917, p. 827; Hardison Londré, pp. 169–79.

²⁴ Viv Gardner, 'Provincial Stages, 1900–1934: Touring and Early Repertory Theatre', in Kershaw, pp. 60–85 (pp. 62–63, 72); Postlewait, pp. 35–37.

²⁵ Postlewait, pp. 37–38; Wild, *Literature of the 1900s: The Great Edwardian Emporium* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017), p. 141; Dennis Kennedy, 'The New Drama and the New Audience', in Booth and Kaplan, pp. 130–47 (pp. 135, 136–37).

²⁶ Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, 'Victorian and Edwardian Audiences', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 93–108 (p. 93); Joseph Donohue, 'What Is the Edwardian Theatre?', in Booth and Kaplan, pp. 10–35 (p. 27).

²⁷ *The Better 'Ole* was originally a play. The Bruce Bairnsfather society holds a copy of the script. (Maunder, 'Introduction: Rediscovering First World War Theatre', *British Theatre*, p. 16; Hanna, 'British Cinema', p. 200).

²⁸ 'The Playgoer's Duty', *The Era*, 14 October 1914, p. 9.

Lord Chamberlain's Office
Stage Plays, ^{Jan} 1914 - Dec 1914 346

Volume NO.	Title	Author	Date of Licence
35 3048-3067	Oh! That Hat	S. Collins	27-11-1914
	Howard	E. Bondinet	30-11-1914
	Supreme Sacrifice	W. Moore	27-11-1914
	Woman who wouldn't		28-11-1914
	Lucky Peter	R. Heggbotham	" "
	Rajah's Ruby		14-11-1914
	Miss Aerial Lee Will Recite	C. Turyford	17-11-1914
	Waiting for a Soldier	J. Wold	3-12-1914
	Sinbad the Sailor	G. Slater	8-12-1914
	Arthur Helmore at Home		3-12-1914
	Aladdin	A. Field	8-12-1914
	Slough	A. Wilson	7-12-1914
	Women of Paris	Pandect + Bellamy	3-12-1914
	Queen of my Heart	H. Brandon	" "
	Bachelors Defense League	P. Barlow-Massielos	7-12-1914
	Alien Irish Terrier		" "
	Three Musketeers	S. Rusken	4-12-1914
	Goody Two Shoes		15-12-1914
	Tea-pot	Bentham + Rawson	7-12-1914
	Mother Goose	R. Waldon	" "
36 3068-3092	Savitri		" "
	Contemptible Little Army	L. Stiles	" "
	Mineral Workers	W. Boyle	" "
	Dunbar, Deane, Diplomatist		17-12-1914
	His Rest Day	M. Boulton	12-12-1914
	Robinson Crusoe	A. Field	10-12-1914
	Mystery Gun	G. Wallace	9-12-1914
	Menace	J. Osgood	" "
	Der Tag	Gi. J. Barue	10-12-1914
	Just Spool	H. Grey	" "

Figure 17: List of licensed plays, British Library, Manuscripts Reading Room (author's photograph).

The large numbers of war plays prohibit a complete survey: there were 7,912 dramas submitted for licensing from 1912 to 1921, with Collins' selective list of 1914–18 'War Plays' or 'War-Related Plays', which excludes most of the texts discussed below, containing eighty titles.²⁹ All of the texts analysed address home-front experience, civilian life occupying a central space on the wartime stage, and were performed in London, Britain's theatre hub. They range from one-act, sketch-like works to full-length plays, include different kinds of humour, and are by a mixture of well-known and minor writers. This continues my project of revealing the functions of humour across popular and progressive, ephemeral and long-lasting texts. Cinema and music hall are excluded, the former being in the ascendancy as the war progressed and the latter, in the form of variety theatre, having 'reached the limits of its expansion by 1914'.³⁰ Though the establishment of the British Board of Film Censors in 1912 suggests cinema's

²⁹ John Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), p. 278; L. J. Collins, pp. 508–13.

³⁰ Russell, p. 81.

increasing significance at the time of the conflict, my focus on the stage reflects theatre's importance: the authorities approached it so carefully 'because it mattered'.³¹

Each of the sections in this chapter deals with different wartime subjects and experiences that are potentially provocative. I begin with the representation of social class and inequality, before moving on to consider portrayals of women's war work, domesticity, and war's implications for masculinity. The texts vary between being politically charged and dealing more with experiences that are potentially emotionally incendiary, though the lines between the political and the emotional are difficult to draw in a context where invitations to intense feeling were themselves a political issue.

4.1 'It's a great leveller this Army': Humour, Social Class, and Expressing the Unsayable.³²

Commenting on Sewell Collins' *A Day in a Dug-Out* (Empire Theatre, Liverpool, 1916), the Lord Chamberlain's reader G. S. Street wrote that 'I don't think there is any harm in one of the privates being a burglar – there are several in the Army – as it is not taken seriously'.³³ The question of what was taken 'seriously' in war plays was central to considerations of whether they were safe for performance. The texts included in this section involve non-serious treatment of class inequality, socialism, and the impact of the conflict on class identity, their humour taking on the Freudian role of circumventing taboos, and helping to give expression to that which might otherwise be highly emotive. The different receptions they received suggest the varying extents to which such taboo-breaking was deemed acceptable. Galsworthy's *The Foundations* (*Foundations*, Royalty Theatre, London, 1917) was licensed for public performance. Shaw's *The Inca of Perusalem* (*Inca*, Little Theatre in the Adelphi, 1915), had alterations requested by the Lord Chamberlain's office, while *Augustus Does His Bit* (*Augustus*, Court Theatre, London, 1917) was performed for a private society, avoiding the need for a licence but, as will be seen, still receiving some disapproval.³⁴ Galsworthy's work is safer than Shaw's, with Shaw's plays at points both subverting political orthodoxies and inviting negative (irritated, offended) reactions to humour. In all of the dramas, though, humour creates emotional and political ambiguity: it holds in balance the provocative and the safe, never quite allowing a clear answer to whether playwrights are 'just kidding'. This is an effect that mirrors, or fits into, the contested nature of theatre, a meeting point of different commercial, artistic, and societal concerns.

³¹ Nicholson, *Censorship*, pp. 5, 304.

³² Sewell Collins, *A Day in a Dug-Out*, London, British Library, LC Plays 1916/19, p. 3. All subsequent 'LCP' and 'LC Plays' citations are held at the British Library.

³³ G. S. Street, report, *A Day in a Dug-Out*, LC Plays 1916/19.

³⁴ Galsworthy, *The Foundations* (1917) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920); Shaw, *The Inca of Perusalem* (1915), in *Playlets*, pp. 191–220; Shaw, *Augustus Does His Bit* (1917), in *Playlets*, pp. 221–46. The 1915 date and performance location of *Inca* is taken from the reader's report, dated 11 November 1915 and stating the play is 'To be produced at the Little Theatre, this week' (Street, Report, *The Inca of Perusalem*, LCP Corr 1915/3885). Elsewhere, the first performance is listed as 7 October 1916 at the Repertory Theatre, Birmingham. A Shaw chronology indicates he finished the play on 9 August 1915, 'for Gertrude Kingston to perform in America'. (Gibbs, *A Bernard Shaw Chronology* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001], pp. 214, 221).

A review in the *Manchester Guardian* described Galsworthy's *Foundations* as a 'fantastical comedy' that could not be 'believe[d] in', but the outlandish – and also humorous – misunderstanding at the centre of the play points to real wartime concerns.³⁵ Set in a troubled post-war Britain, the plot involves Lemmy, a plumber, leaving what appears to be a bomb in the cellar of a well-meaning but absurd upper-class character, Lord William Dromondy. Dromondy gives work to the men with whom he served, unlike other former officers who, in James the footman's words, 'looks down their noses' as before.³⁶ The play ends after Lemmy successfully deflects a revolutionary mob from Dromondy's home and the 'bomb' turns out to be a ballcock.³⁷ Class-based inequality and its potential political consequences are given humorous treatment throughout, beginning with the Dromondys' daughter, Anne, asking James 'do you think there's going to be a bloody revolution?', which phrasing she says she learnt from her father.³⁸ Similarly, in the final act, Anne makes friends with a working-class child, Aida, their conversation creating a humorously absurd perspective on class conflict. Shown the 'bomb', for instance, Aida asks why anyone would damage 'a beautiful big 'ouse': 'I'll blow up our 'ouse – it's an ugly little 'ouse'.³⁹

Foundations was granted a licence partly because it suggested a need to prevent revolution, as Street makes clear in his assessment but, as he also indicates, Galsworthy's humour contributed to him 'getting away' with his politically charged subject. His exploration of social upheaval addresses concerns about the conflict's socio-economic and political impact, including anxieties that it would 'brutalise' the population.⁴⁰ Street judged the drama could 'do nothing but good in the way of warning' and, certainly, Galsworthy recommends accord between classes.⁴¹ Street in addition remarks that 'Taken merely as a comedy Mr Galsworthy's new play is an admirable [...] work', and that Lemmy is a 'humorous socialist' – and he draws attention to Lemmy's 'good humoured speech' that disperses the mob.⁴² The play's humour thus contributed to it being deemed safe for performance, with Street's 'merely' conveying an attitude according to which comedy is not sufficiently weighty to cause suspicion. Whereas Street attributes practical efficacy to the play in general, judging that it might work as a 'warning', he seems to see its humour as innocent, as removed from any significant impact.

Freud writes that 'tendentious jokes are especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority', and such joke-work is central both to Galsworthy's representation of socio-economic hierarchies, and to his

³⁵ A. N. M., 'Prince's Theatre: *A Kiss For Cinderella*', *Manchester Guardian*, 16 October 1917, p. 4.

³⁶ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 5.

³⁷ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), pp. 87, 90.

³⁸ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), pp. 3–4.

³⁹ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 68.

⁴⁰ Gary Sheffield, *A Short History of the First World War* (London: Oneworld, 2014), pp. 82, 97, 158–60, 170; Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *The Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89 (p. 557).

⁴¹ Street, report, *Foundations*, LC Plays 1917/11; Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), pp. 20, 42.

⁴² Street, *Foundations*.

thematisation of laughter as an oblique form of communication.⁴³ The climactic meeting between Dromondy and the revolutionaries revolves around who can and cannot speak, with laughter contributing to the depiction of inter-class dialogue (or lack of it). When preparing to address the group, there is a comic moment in which one of Lemmy's gumdrops prevents Dromondy from speaking until he throws it away, accidentally silencing a protestor – 'Dahn with the aristo——', an incident that is then written-up (again to comic effect) in the voice of a sensationalist reporter called 'the Press'.⁴⁴ He comments, 'With inimitable coolness Lord William prepared to address the crowd'.⁴⁵ Dromondy still, however, cannot articulate his views, stumbling over his words despite multiple prompts from his more lucid wife, whose voice is mediated – and distorted – through her husband's, and he is met with '*Rude and hoarse laughter from the crowd*'.⁴⁶ Difficulties of communication thus culminate in critical laughter, a means for the revolutionaries to express themselves. Dromondy, at this point literally as well as metaphorically in a 'high place', has laughter directed at him where violence could easily have emerged. Freudian tendentious humour here satisfies the crowd's 'hostile' drive in the place of physical aggression – making Lemmy's articulacy, which shortly afterwards prevents the protestors from indulging their destructive instincts, all the more important.⁴⁷ (Intriguingly, moreover, if Dromondy's verbal failings, accompanied by his family's interjections – Anne repeats an earlier '*agonised*' 'Oh, Daddy!' – prompted laughter from audiences, there would be moments of shared amusement between those in the auditorium and an [albeit fictional] revolutionary throng).⁴⁸

In addition, the play's central joke revolves around something that cannot be said, but which can be laughed at for those who are in the know: laughter and amusement are depicted in ways that suggest they can be oblique means of addressing taboo subjects. Touching on the sexually risqué, the bomb/ballcock joke is highly Freudian. 'The power which makes it difficult or impossible' to 'enjoy undisguised obscenity is termed by us "repression"', Freud writes, and due to this power, we 'could never bring ourselves to laugh at a coarse piece of smut [...] We can only laugh when a joke has come to our help'.⁴⁹ The characters' great amusement over the eventual clarification over the bomb, and the emphasis placed on their refusal to pronounce explicitly what it really is, in fact draw attention to humour's capacity to escape the taboo. It is never overtly revealed what the 'bomb' really is: when Lemmy explains that it is not an explosive, Dromondy '*bends double in silent laughter*', '*whispers to his wife*', and '*LADY WILLIAM drops the bomb and gives way too*'.⁵⁰ Galsworthy leaves Anne out of

⁴³ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 105. There is also a parallel with Shaftesbury's position that restrictions on speech mean people express themselves via 'raillery'. Shaftesbury felt that the 'free Spirits of ingenious Men', if 'controul'd', will be 'vent[ed]' in humour (p. 46).

⁴⁴ A representation that piqued more than one reviewer: 'John Galsworthy: An Evening at Leeds University', *The Cologne Post*, 19 October 1920, p. 2; A. S. W., 'A Little Theatre on Tour: *The Foundations* at The Prince's', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 December 1920, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 82.

⁴⁶ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 83.

⁴⁷ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 104–05.

⁴⁸ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 83.

⁴⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

⁵⁰ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 89.

the fun – her governess ‘has her hands placed firmly over her pupil’s eyes and ears’ – emphasising further the refusal to explain, and teasing anyone not in the know by aligning them with childish innocence. The play’s final line is from Anne: ‘Oh! Mum! what *was* it?’⁵¹ A *Manchester Guardian* critic highlighted the finale’s obscurity: ‘what it really was is a joke which Mr Galsworthy must be left to make himself’.⁵² Galsworthy leaves open the risk that the object is something too rude to mention on stage, playing with the idea of the bomb being potentially incendiary in more ways than one, the joke about the misunderstanding becoming one about respectability, and censorship.

Freud suggested that official censorship encouraged self-censorship, reflecting the idea articulated before the conflict that the Lord Chamberlain’s system created a less experimental British stage, and this kind of connection is part of what Galsworthy is playing with here. Referring to a case study of a dream in which a woman reported gaps in dialogue at moments that would otherwise have involved sexually explicit conversation, Freud contended that it was

plausible to suppose that it was precisely the objectionable nature of these passages that was the motive for their suppression. Where shall we find a parallel to such an event? You need not look far in these days. Take up any political newspaper and you will find that here and there the text is absent and in its place nothing except the white paper is to be seen. This, as you know, is the work of the press censorship.⁵³

In other cases, he continues, and with the belief that ‘we can keep close to this parallel’, censorship ‘has not gone to work on a passage *after* it has already been completed’, the author instead seeing ‘in advance which passages might expect to give rise to objections from the censorship’ and ‘ton[ing] them down in advance, modif[ying] them slightly’, or ‘content[ing] himself with approximations and allusions to what would genuinely have come from his pen’.⁵⁴ As Peter Galison explains, for Freud censorship was both ‘a psychic agency’ and ‘a literal mechanism enlisted for political repression and stabilization’.⁵⁵ Galsworthy’s comic business over the ballcock toys with both forms of censorship, his characters’ embarrassment and amusement suggesting psychic repression at the same time as their silence highlights the influence of the official censor. Street, not in on the joke, queried the drama’s ending: ‘What on earth it [the ballcock] is supposed to be I do not know [...] One cannot suspect Mr Galsworthy of any offensive joke. Perhaps, however, the Lord Chamberlain would like an enquiry made’.⁵⁶ In a telling nod to the importance of reputation to plays’ receptions, Street seems unwilling to attribute improper joking

⁵¹ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), pp. 89–90.

⁵² A. S. W., ‘Little Theatre’, p. 11.

⁵³ Freud, ‘The Censorship of Dreams’ (1915), in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 168–81 (p. 171).

⁵⁴ Freud, ‘Dreams’, p. 171.

⁵⁵ Peter Galison, ‘Blacked-out Spaces: Freud, Censorship and the Re-Territorialization of Mind’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, 45 (2012), 235–66 (p. 238).

⁵⁶ Street, *Foundations*.

to Galsworthy, yet, also tellingly in relation to humour's functioning, he articulates his suspicions of the unknown in the play with reference to the potential for humour to be subversive, showing sensitivity to humour's capacity for oblique communication. (This contrasts his position, explained above, that the drama's humour is innocuous, an ambiguity that speaks to the equivocal nature of theatrical comedy – to the sense that light plays were perceived as safer than serious ones, yet could also include the rude and the risqué). The bomb/ballcock thus has a rich significance beyond driving the plot and acting as a prop for farcical misunderstanding. It is the object around which the close relationship between amusement and the unspeakable in the play centres.

The 'bomb' is also a projection of the war's pervasive influence. Though most obviously a warning of what the conflict's legacy might be, the object is charged with other concerns about the transition to peacetime as well.⁵⁷ James is quick to see the ballcock as a bomb because the war is still on his mind. After it has been discovered, he sees the cellar transform into the front: '*the habits of the past are too much for him. He sits on the ground*'; Anne re-enters '*as from a communication trench*'.⁵⁸ In addition, Dromondy's inarticulacy, his tendency to 'stammer' and to 'lose the thread of his thoughts', is a symptom of shell shock. In this sense, when Lemmy comes to his aid he is rescuing Dromondy from more than one effect of the war, helping to deal with the symptoms of psychological strain as well as the revolutionaries.⁵⁹ The Press, once the situation has been brought under control, notes 'far up in the clear summer air the larks were singing', which description causes Dromondy a moment of confusion: '[Blinking] Those infernal larks! Thought we were on the Somme again!'⁶⁰ This is a joke about the cliché of referring to larks as a metaphor for peace after battle, as well as a comic take on the experience of shell shock – it is birds that haunt Dromondy rather than bombs. Shell shock is a taboo issue, and an emotional one as well, and Galsworthy's brief comic reference to it presents the opportunity for audiences to engage in the kind of emotional exchange that Freud describes. Freud's category of humour is a form of amusement that offers 'a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it'.⁶¹ The varieties of humour are 'extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on'. Humour can be extended further 'whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto unconquered emotions to the control of humour'.⁶² Such humour in other words allows people, via laughter, to expend energy that would have been spent on negative feelings. Even so, the subject may also be viewed as uncomfortable despite – or because of – the amusement Galsworthy invites, whether for modern audiences well-versed in the psychological trauma that the conflict caused, or for original audience members who may have witnessed such effects. Front-line experience was certainly known to

⁵⁷ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 4.

⁵⁸ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 7.

⁵⁹ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 59.

⁶⁰ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), p. 87. In the typescript, Lemmy echoes Dromondy: 'Thought I was in me 'igh explosive works agyne – those internal [sic] larks' (Galsworthy, *Foundations*, London, British Library, LC Plays 1917/11, pp. 29–30).

⁶¹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 228.

⁶² Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 231–32.

have caused such trauma, with symptoms of mental breakdown in servicemen having been officially labelled ‘shell shock’ from 1915, two years before the play was performed.⁶³ As noted in the introduction, it is unusual to find humorous references to shell shock, and this is one instance where inviting amusement in response to the subject may jar.

If humour facilitated the staging of potentially emotionally and politically challenging themes, then there is a question over whether it dampened the contested nature of these topics, making them safe. The play’s humour invites emotions such as mild amusement and light-heartedness rather than stronger feelings, such as anger and fear, that it was feared could prompt audience members to take action. In this sense commentators at the time were correct in thinking that humorous treatment of controversial topics was less dangerous – less politically and socially radical – than serious approaches. As suggested above, Freud’s understanding that humour involves negative emotion being replaced by amusement helps to explain how such muting might take place, and Ngai’s theory of minor feelings casts further light on this process. Her literary-critical approach to aesthetic emotions is especially helpful for elucidating the complex interactions at work in the wartime theatre, in this case the relationship between, first, the emotional invitations that *Foundations* makes, second, the controlled, censored nature of the circumstances of its production and, third, the muted nature of its political position. Minor feelings are small, such as irritation and envy, not as large as the emotions that have tended to be privileged in critical discussion, such as anger. In Ngai’s work, ‘minor and generally unprestigious feelings are deliberately favored over grander passions like anger and fear (cornerstones of the philosophical discourse of emotions, from Aristotle to the present)’.⁶⁴ Minor feelings are, furthermore, removed from ‘forceful or unambiguous action’:

While one can be irritated without realizing it, or knowing exactly what one is irritated about, there can be nothing ambiguous about one’s rage or terror, or about what one is terrified of or enraged about. Yet the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular.⁶⁵

The invitations *Foundations* makes are provocations towards more positive versions of Ngai’s minor feelings. The play invites ‘small’ feelings – mild amusement, levity – of the kind that have not received extensive or prominent critical attention and, like minor feelings, these are responses to, and highlight, circumstances of restricted speech and action. As has been explored, at the time of the war there was a sense that humorous performances circumvented the kind of extreme passions that could lead to subversive political activity. Galsworthy’s thematisation of laughter’s capacity to circumvent censorship

⁶³ Tracey Loughran, *Shell-Shock and Medical Culture in First World War Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), pp. 10–11.

⁶⁴ Ngai, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Ngai, p. 27.

reflects this: his use of humour draws attention to the limits of what could be said on stage, to the ‘thwarting’ involved in censorship.⁶⁶

While Galsworthy’s humour does have the Freudian function of circumventing literal and emotional censorship, then, the levity his play encourages also tempers what could have been highly inflammatory subject matter, creating a balance between the safe and the subversive. Suitably enough, given the plot’s warning against public disorder, the emotions the play invites are not of the kind that might, to return to the phrase from the *Times*, incite audiences to ‘burn the city’.⁶⁷ In addition, the comic structure of *Foundations* has a safe quality: the plot sees the chance of violence build – the bomb may go off, the crowd may become aggressive – yet such threats are not realised. As Eltis observes, the danger from the bomb is ‘comically dispelled’.⁶⁸ Kosok, indeed, is absolute in his suggestion that the play’s light entertainment is antithetical to political comment. He argues Galsworthy’s ‘satirical attack’ is ‘lost’ in ‘farcical incidents’.⁶⁹ Even so, the humour and laughter that the play portrays and invites are means of discussing in public material related to deep concerns: the effect of the war on class relations, revolution, and the conflict’s psychological impact. As Freud says, ‘The repressive activity of civilization brings it about that primary possibilities of enjoyment, which have now [...] been repudiated by the censorship in us, are lost’, but joking is sufficiently oblique to allow us to access this pleasure.⁷⁰ Against the script’s generally comic backdrop, Lemmy is even able to give voice to solemnly-expressed revolutionary ideas: ‘If yer went into the foundytions of your wealf – would yer feel like ‘avin’ any? It all comes from uvver people’s ’ard, unpleasant lybour’; ‘Dahn wiv the country [...] Begin agyne from the foundytions’; Dromondy’s house will make a ‘palace of varieties where our children can [...] see ’ow they did it in the good old dyes’.⁷¹ Lemmy’s opinions do get heard, and not in a way that means they are disparaged or ridiculed, while at the same time it is always possible to see him as merely a ‘humorous socialist’.⁷² Galsworthy argued in 1913 that audiences should demand ‘First and last amusement’ from the theatre, which might include laughter, but was also a matter of thoughtfulness or ‘diversion of the mind’.⁷³ *Foundations* includes such a mixture of inviting mirth and inviting thought.

Shaw’s *Inca* involves similar tensions between the safe and the provocative. Its heroine, Ermyntrude, who is recently widowed, takes literally her father’s recommendation that she works as a lady’s maid until she finds another husband rich enough to support her extravagance. Having convinced a princess to employ her, Ermyntrude meets the Inca, a caricature of Wilhelm II, who has disguised himself as ‘Captain Duval’. Ermyntrude impersonates the princess and the Inca eventually proposes to her, though they do not marry because, due to the war, ‘Kings nowadays belong to the poorer classes’.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Ngai, p. 27.

⁶⁷ Nicholson, *Censorship*, pp. 56–7.

⁶⁸ Eltis, ‘Sex-War’, p. 114.

⁶⁹ Kosok, p. 68.

⁷⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

⁷¹ Galsworthy, *Foundations* (1920), pp. 76, 85.

⁷² Ngai, p. 20.

⁷³ ‘Mr John Galsworthy: Amusement and Laughter in the Theatre’, *Manchester Guardian*, 2 December 1913, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Shaw, *Inca*, p. 217.

The humour is mainly at the expense of Wilhelm II: the princess fears marrying him because he ‘has made war on everybody’, and ‘I shall have to pretend that everybody has made war on him’. He is ‘prepared to embrace the Mahometan faith’ to ‘please the Turks’, and in Street’s words there is ‘funny chaff about his moustache’.⁷⁵ Class, too, is treated humorously: Ermytrude’s waiter is incompetent because he was previously an eminent doctor: ‘the war came’ and his ‘patients were ordered to give up their luxuries. They gave up their doctors, but kept their week-end hotels’.⁷⁶ The princess’ tea is cold because ‘it was made by the wife of a once fashionable architect’ and the cake is ‘half toasted’ because baked by ‘a ruined west-end tailor’.⁷⁷

The Lord Chamberlain’s office focused on Shaw’s references to Wilhelm II and the British royals. The play in part encourages audiences to take pleasure in the presentation of the German emperor as an object of ridicule, to engage in Cartesian ‘Derision or mockery’ – ‘a species of joy mingled with hatred’.⁷⁸ Or, in Freudian terms, the jokes at the Emperor’s expense save ‘expenditure upon inhibition’, allowing pleasure to be taken in an aggressive ‘instinct’ that is normally ‘inaccessible’.⁷⁹ Indeed, playwrights were not generally allowed to write in a way that could jeopardise relations with other nations: scripts that identified Germany as a potential enemy before the war proved problematic. Even ‘sympathetic portrait[s]’ of British monarchs, meanwhile, could be controversial with the Lord Chamberlain.⁸⁰ Street states he has ‘blue-pencilled’ a reference to the Inca’s uncle (‘As this obviously means King Edward it may be thought disrespectful to his memory’), a mention of the Inca’s grandmother, Queen Victoria, and an ‘allusion to King George’s abstinence from wine’.⁸¹ The rules surrounding foreign leaders were, however, relaxed during the war – by August 1915 the Lord Chamberlain’s office no longer saw a need to prohibit representations of Wilhelm II – and Street allows Shaw’s references to the German ruler, ‘since it is agreed that he no longer be treated with respect’, a decision with which Douglas Dawson, the Lord Chamberlain’s Comptroller, agreed.⁸² This suggests, to return to Freud’s framework, that there was largely no longer any need to couch aggression towards Germany in tendentious jokes, though it seems the censors partially retained their pre-war reluctance to allow aggression towards the German ruler, even in the form of satire. The amendments asked of Gertrude Kingston, actress and proprietor of the Little Theatre where *Inca* was to be performed, included a request that make-up for the actor playing the Inca should not ‘too closely resemble the German Emperor’, and something of the intensity of the aggression that these amendments sought to curb emerged in Kingston’s response.⁸³ She accused the censors of being ‘careful’ of the Kaiser’s ‘sensitive feelings’, adding ‘when I think of the many “gemütlich” [pleasant, genial] Germans I have known who

⁷⁵ Shaw, *Inca*, pp. 205, 217; Street, *Inca*.

⁷⁶ Shaw, *Inca*, p. 202.

⁷⁷ Shaw, *Inca*, p. 202.

⁷⁸ Descartes, p. 268.

⁷⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

⁸⁰ Nicholson, *Censorship*, pp. 101, 121–22, 76, 144–45.

⁸¹ Street, *Inca*.

⁸² Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 122; Street, *Inca*; Douglas Dawson, Memo, 12 November 1915, LCPCorr 1915/3885.

⁸³ H. Trundell[?], letter to Gertrude Kingston, 15 November 1915, LCPCorr 1915/3885.

are proved of such misdeeds[?] as Louvain & Lusitania, I shudder to think I have ever treated them as equals, or even as humans'.⁸⁴ Kingston's vehemence may have been stoked by the fact she had previous conflicts with Dawson, to whom her remarks were addressed.⁸⁵ Even so, her exchange with the censors indicates that satire of the German ruler could be one of the more provocative forms of wartime humour.

Shaw's ridicule, though, may be aimed in two directions, and this slipperiness should have roused greater misgivings from the censor's point of view: his satire might extend to British narratives of the war. As with some of his comments on Galsworthy's play, Street in his report on *Inca* associates humorousness with innocuousness. Again using 'mere' to preface the term 'comic', and making a distinction between humorousness and profundity, Street describes the text as 'an elaborate presentment, partly satirical and comical, partly (at least in intention) profound, of the German Emperor', deciding that Shaw's representation of the monarch is 'on a different footing from a mere comic introduction in a pantomime'.⁸⁶ As has been seen, Street also removed two references to the Kaiser's British family members, seemingly without recognising that these familial connections point towards the potential for the play to be read as criticising the British account of the war alongside the German one. Shaw attributed responsibility for the war 'almost evenly between British commercial adventurers and Germany's militarists', his highly controversial 1914 essay 'Common Sense about the War' questioning the narrative that the Allies were innocent victims.⁸⁷ While we 'allow ourselves to disregard' restraints on aggression 'in relation to a foreign people', Freud writes, in 'our own circle we have made some advances in the control of hostile impulses', developing 'a new technique of invective' in the form of comedy: a 'roundabout way' of achieving 'the enjoyment of overcoming' an opponent.⁸⁸ Because Shaw uses this route to direct joking against Britain as well as its antagonist, this is one instance in which humour does 'sneak' something past the censor.

That Shaw's satire of the British war narrative is sufficiently oblique to bypass Street, a perceptive and sometimes progressive reader, however, speaks to a sense in the play that humour is limited in what it can achieve, that it might not be, politically, 'enough'.⁸⁹ There is an awareness in *Inca* that humour can facilitate the expression of sentiments that may otherwise go unsaid, but that this does not necessarily have a practical political or social impact. Ermyntrude claims that 'mak[ing] fun' of the Inca is 'fair': 'What other defence have we poor common people against your shining armour, your mailed fist, your pomp and parade, your terrible power over us?'⁹⁰ Though she sees satire as a means for members of the public to assert themselves, her inclusion of herself among 'common people' is questionable, since she is an archdeacon's daughter, and her stated powerlessness is disingenuous

⁸⁴ Gertrude Kingston, letter to Douglas Dawson, 20 November 1915, LCPCorr 1915/3885.

⁸⁵ Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 75.

⁸⁶ Street, *Inca*.

⁸⁷ Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p. 448; Shaw, 'Common Sense About the War', in *Current History of the European War* (New York: The New York Times Company, 1914), pp. 11–60.

⁸⁸ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 102–03.

⁸⁹ Nicholson, 'Getting Away', p. 65.

⁹⁰ Shaw, *Inca*, p. 220.

considering her substantial manipulative ability.⁹¹ Whatever she may say, Ermyntrude could use her capability and wit to do more than tease. This intimation that her mockery may be profitless is given weight by the fact that her comments follow a solemn speech by the Inca in which he reveals his subjects' influence and suggests that satire may not lead to progressive change: 'for years I gave them art, literature, science, prosperity' and they 'ridiculed me, caricatured me', but they are 'devoted' now he gives 'death'.⁹² Immediately before Ermyntrude's claim to have no power other than derision, the Inca has thus pointed out that he takes account of citizens' views, and that 'ridicule' and 'caricature' do not prevent disaster. While Galsworthy thematised the idea of laughter as an expression of that which it is difficult to say, Shaw's dialogue calls into question the bite, or efficacy, of his own medium of satire.

Shaw's *Augustus* contained a more explicit critique of a militaristic, British upper class. The plot centres on the incompetent civil servant Lord Augustus Highcastle who, as a result of a bet by his brother 'Blueloo' in the foreign office, is tricked by a character called only 'the Lady' into giving away secret military information. Augustus protests that the bet is an 'abuse' of officials who 'are doing their bit' whilst 'our gallant fellows are perishing in the trenches', a phrase that resonated with Shaw: he later commented that it was only when 'first-class' Lusitania passengers were killed that many realised the war was 'more serious than reading dispatches [...] about "our gallant fellows in the trenches"'.⁹³ In response to Augustus' reproach, the Lady suggests that there are servicemen in the audience and 'I am sure you won't grudge them a little fun at your expense'.⁹⁴ This 'fun' includes mockery of what the *Era*'s reviewer called Augustus' 'high-fallutin [sic]' talk about "'serving his country" and "doing his duty" and "making sacrifices"'.⁹⁵ There are also moments in which the broader wartime situation is satirised, including restrictions on speech, such as Augustus' clerk refusing to 'insinuate anything until the Defence of the Realm Act is repealed'.⁹⁶

The conflict between Augustus and the Lady is a complex and playful consideration of what can be permitted in the name of 'fun', and in the name of servicemen – or of what fun could be permitted in the name of servicemen. The Lady's claim to be entertaining soldiers assumes their support – she uses them to justify her behaviour in the same self-serving move that Augustus attempts – a moment that satirises the protagonist's selfish co-option of servicemen by using his own tactic against him. Her line is rich with meta-theatrical resonance, as much a comment on Shaw's humour as her own practical joke. Comedy often involves, in Joanne Gilbert's words, claims of permissibility based on comics 'say[ing], "I'm just kidding"', and this is at work here.⁹⁷ Apparently speaking through the Lady to disgruntled audience members, Shaw legitimises his mockery: the Lady's comment hints that any offence taken stems not from flaws in Shaw's jokes, but from spectators' humourless unwillingness to

⁹¹ Shaw, *Inca*, p. 195.

⁹² Shaw, *Inca*, p. 219.

⁹³ Qtd. in Gibbs, *Shaw: Interviews*, p. 253.

⁹⁴ Shaw, *Augustus*, p. 246.

⁹⁵ 'First Nights of the Week', *Era*, 24 Jan 1917, p. 1.

⁹⁶ Shaw, *Augustus*, pp. 228, 229.

⁹⁷ Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2014), p. 12.

allow much-revered servicemen their entertainment. As Gilbert also notes, though, the rhetorical device of saying ‘I’m just kidding’ is not always placatory: joke-tellers have been condemned ‘precisely because of the “weight” of a purported “jest”’. When it is not clear ‘whether someone is speaking in jest’, ‘the discourse does carry the same weight as ordinary communication’, while certain topics may be perceived as entirely “off-limits” and will always be taken “seriously”’.⁹⁸ The ostentatious provocativeness of the Lady’s assertion that she is ‘just kidding’ suggests Shaw knew very well that her excuse could be incendiary rather than mollifying: it has the potential to irritate any audience members – military or civilian – who do not find her prank and the drama’s satire funny, since it denies the legitimacy of such disapproval. Indeed, Shaw was not universally admired amongst the servicemen he professes to please.⁹⁹ It is a moment of ‘audience participation’ in which, to borrow Helen Freshwater’s phrase, the ‘complicity of the audience members is assumed’ – and Shaw’s claims to be tailoring his jokes to servicemen seems to use such coercion partially in order to goad.¹⁰⁰

Reviews indicate that some audience members were not amused. A writer for the *Stage* noted that *Augustus* was ‘by no means received with enthusiasm at the Court’, as well as insinuating that Shaw’s anonymity (he was not named on the programme) could be due to embarrassment: it ‘may have been unusual modesty (it can hardly have been that for once in a while the great “G. B. S.” was a little bit ashamed)’.¹⁰¹ The *Sunday Mirror*’s reviewer stated that *Augustus* ‘roused even the dizzy-browed Stage Society to demonstrations of disapproval’, while the *Observer*’s reporter wrote that ‘Mingled with the applause at the fall of the curtain [...] were one or two sounds of a sibilant kind’: while many in the Court audience may have enjoyed the play, a ‘larger public [...] might have been resentful’.¹⁰² The *Era*’s writer contemplated whether *Augustus*, a ‘cheap’ jibe, would have been performed ‘Had a lesser man than Mr Shaw’ written it.¹⁰³ Shaw’s humour at one level has the same Freudian function of opening up repressed sources of pleasure as have already been explored – his ridicule of Augustus makes possible ‘aggressiveness or criticism’ towards ‘persons in exalted positions’ – but the responses quoted indicate that the humour in *Augustus* is more complex than this model suggests.¹⁰⁴ Shaw’s ridicule partially invited, but did not entirely succeed, in making his audience enjoy the pleasures of a taboo being broken: the wartime context limited the enthusiasm with which his invitations to amusement were received. Humour does not always, or only, provoke mirth, and in *Augustus* it is employed in a way that is not a matter of entirely allaying disapproval or unease, but of encouraging these kinds of reaction as well.

⁹⁸ Joanne Gilbert, p. 12.

⁹⁹ To give just one example, a trench-newspaper call for submissions read ‘CONTRIBUTIONS, literary and otherwise (G. Bernard Shaw please refrain) will be welcomed’ (*Growler*, July 1915, p. 12).

¹⁰⁰ Freshwater, p. 65.

¹⁰¹ There was little doubt amongst reviewers as to his authorship (‘The Stage Society’, *The Stage*, 25 January 1917, p. 16).

¹⁰² Initially performed for the Stage Society, *Augustus* was licensed for the public in 1924 (Report, *Augustus Does His Bit*, LCP 1924/19); ‘In the Limelight: Criticising the Audience’, *The Sunday Mirror*, 28 January 1917, p. 11; G. Fay, ‘*Augustus Does His Bit*’, *Observer*, 28 January 1917, p. 5.

¹⁰³ ‘First Nights of the Week’, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 105.

The introduction to this chapter noted that Shaw's reputation contributed to the suppression of *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, and it received a licence in 1922 partly because Street judged that if alterations were demanded, 'Mr Shaw would refuse and there would be a disproportionate fuss'.¹⁰⁵ Shaw's established association with controversy may similarly have influenced how his other war plays were received.¹⁰⁶ He had addressed challenging subjects before the war, including such topics as New Women, socialist politics, and imperialism. *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893), most famously, with its exploration of prostitution and women's limited chances of employment did not receive a licence for public performance until 1925 – though it was staged privately in 1902, while *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* was staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1909, having been banned from performance in England because of alleged blasphemy.¹⁰⁷ Shaw, moreover, was known for satire that was slippery and sharply truth-telling. Commentators before 1914 had long observed his tendency to use 'ironic comedy' to 'mask a serious purpose'.¹⁰⁸ One commentator in 1905 described Shaw's narratives as 'extremely disagreeable', but containing 'facts [...] which the reformer and the philosopher must be prepared to face': Shaw delivered morals 'with a jest'.¹⁰⁹ In 1910 a tongue-in-cheek profile compared him to a 'Mephistophelian Puck': with 'diabolical intuition', Shaw 'says exactly the opposite to what he means to convey, and conveys it'; his language is 'tangential and paradoxical'; he can 'prove with equal facility' that 'black is white, that Anarchism and Conservatism are one and the same thing'.¹¹⁰ Reviewers of his wartime plays used his reputation as a source of either praise or of blame, depending on the extent to which his dramas conformed to patriotic, war-supporting views. Some of the comments on *Augustus* above use Shaw's standing against him (the sarcastic references to his 'unusual modesty' and position above 'lesser m[e]n'), yet a *Saturday Review* account of the ostensibly patriotic *Inca* did the opposite: as with *Augustus*, Shaw was not named on programmes, and the reporter commented that 'The bushel is not yet made which can hide the talent of Mr Shaw'.¹¹¹

Galsworthy, although associated – as was Shaw – with New Drama, did not court the same notoriety, as is reflected in the censor's reception of *Foundations*. Street characterised the play as up-to-date, hypothesising that any offence it caused would be due to audience members' outmoded views, and judging that Galsworthy's drama, though likely to 'shock old-fashioned opinion', was 'a trifle to much in Mr Shaw's plays'.¹¹² The exploration of inequality in *Foundations* echoes some of the themes and didacticism found in Galsworthy's earlier drama, for example *Strife* (1909), which is about confrontations and negotiations between striking workers, their trade union, and their employers, and

¹⁰⁵ Street, report, *O'Flaherty, V.C.* LCPCorr 1922/4288.

¹⁰⁶ By the mid-1890s 'Scurrilous attacks' were 'regularly made on [Shaw]' (Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw: The One-Volume Definitive Edition*, p. 169).

¹⁰⁷ L. W. Connolly, 'Mrs Warren's Profession and the Lord Chamberlain', *Shaw: the Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, 24 (2004), 49–95 (pp. 49, 56, 64).

¹⁰⁸ Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 177.

¹⁰⁹ 'Knowledge Is Power', *The Morpeth Herald*, 18 March 1905, p. 2.

¹¹⁰ C. N. Desmond, 'Bernard Shaw's Secret', *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 19 November 1910, p. 653.

¹¹¹ 'The Inca of Perusalem', *Saturday Review*, 22 December 1917, pp. 501–02 (p. 501).

¹¹² Street, *Foundations*.

The Silver Box (1907), which depicts upper-class hypocrisy and a justice system that favours the rich.¹¹³ Typical of the sentiments these plays express is the protest in *Strife* of a character called Harness, a trade union official, when addressing the chairman and directors of the works at which the drama takes place: ‘Can’t we have done with this old-fashioned tug-of-war business? What good’s it doing you?’, he asks, ‘Why don’t you recognise once and for all that these people are men like yourselves, and want what’s good for them just as you want what’s good for you – [*Bitterly.*] Your motor-cars, and champagne, and eight-course dinners’.¹¹⁴ The court scene in *The Silver Box*, meanwhile, includes a case, similar to ‘hundreds’ of others, of ‘two little girls’ whose mother ‘has broken up the home and gone on the streets’ and whose father ‘is out of work and living in common lodging houses’.¹¹⁵ The father’s testimony includes the statement that ‘I’m a strong man – I’m willing to work – I’m half as alive again as some of ‘em – but you see, your Worship, my ‘airs’ turned a bit, owing to the fever [...] and that’s against me; and I don’t seem to get a chance’.¹¹⁶ Galsworthy’s treatment of these subjects was well received.¹¹⁷ One *Times* commentator in 1907 suggested that ‘To contrast the wit of [Eugène Brieux’s] *Les Hanneçons* with that of *The Silver Box*’ is to compare the ‘genuinely comic spirit and the bitter, almost savage, fun of a man who, though he laughs, is angry’; Galsworthy ‘handled his subject so lightly that [...] though dangerously moved, [we are] ready to hear all he has to tell’.¹¹⁸ The playwright’s method of approaching vexed, sensitive topics ‘lightly’ – and the way in which this contrasts Shaw’s work – reflects their different relationships with censorship before the conflict. Both had wanted reform, but whereas Galsworthy had never ‘been troubled by the Censor’, Shaw had clashed with the Lord Chamberlain’s office.¹¹⁹

In Galsworthy’s and Shaw’s wartime dramas, humour creates amusement from subjects that might elsewhere encourage anxiety, reducing the potential for extreme emotional provocation, as in Freud’s understanding of humour according to which amusement can come ‘from an economy in expenditure upon feeling’.¹²⁰ In this sense the dramas invite the kind of response that Ngai terms minor feelings, dissociated not only from strong emotions but also from clear action. In both *Inca* and *Foundations* humour makes uncomfortable subjects (seem as though they are) safe – dampening their offensiveness and precluding the controversy they could cause. Even so, there are moments in which the plays’ generally humorous tones allow the playwrights to ‘sneak’ more subversive ideas onto the stage, such as Shaw’s critique of the British war narrative, and Lemmy’s explanation of revolutionary ideas. In this respect humour takes on a Freudian role of bypassing psychic and literal censorship, giving

¹¹³ Galsworthy, *Strife* (1909) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1918); Galsworthy, *The Silver Box* (1907) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916).

¹¹⁴ Galsworthy, *Strife*, p. 181.

¹¹⁵ Galsworthy, *Silver Box*, p. 61.

¹¹⁶ Galsworthy, *Silver Box*, p. 63.

¹¹⁷ Dupré, pp. 119, 122, 162.

¹¹⁸ ‘Royal Court Theatre’, *The Times*, 9 April 1907, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ Jan McDonald, ‘Barrie and the New Dramatists’, in *Gateway to the Modern: Resituating J. M. Barrie* ed. by Valentina Bold and Andrew Nash (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2014), pp. 1–16 (p. 11).

¹²⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 236.

vent to that which otherwise may have gone unsaid, with both Galsworthy and Shaw in fact thematising the relationship between humour and expression. Galsworthy indicates humour's capacity to point towards the unsayable; Shaw in *Inca* highlights that mockery as a form of political speech may not succeed in effecting change, and in *Augustus* he plays with the boundaries of what saying 'only joking' could allow. The potential for ambiguity in humorous representation means that humour is suited to, or helps to manage, the contested space of the stage, for the most part balancing the need to make plays safe enough for licensing, the need to entertain, and the need to discuss the issues of the day. The exception that stretches this rule is Shaw's satire in *Augustus*: performed without the need for a licence and provoking some audience displeasure, the work was censor- but not censure-free, humour being employed to invite audience disapproval instead of (or at least alongside) amusement, revealing the limits of what he could use humour to express.

4.2 Women's War Work and Changing Domestic Spaces.

Similarly complex relationships between humour and provocation feature in plays that address wartime domestic spaces and women's war work, particularly in relation to the experience of middle- and upper-class women. The texts discussed here are Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood's *Billeted: A Comedy in Three Acts* (*Billeted*, Royalty Theatre, London, 1917) and Jennings' *Poached Eggs and Pearls* (*Poached*, Apollo Theatre, London, 1916).¹²¹ In these dramas, humour acts as a corrective, encouraging behaviour deemed to be useful for the war effort and directing ridicule towards those who do not engage in such activity, as well as circumventing anxiety or disapproval as responses to topics that might provoke such reactions if treated solemnly, as in Freud's and Ngai's theories. Both texts give positive perspectives on women's war work and represent it as an extension of domestic female labour, reflecting the trend that Eltis identifies of wartime heroines 'maintain[ing] their traditional domestic roles of wife, mother and sweetheart': the performance of women's employment was 'characterised by continuity', despite large numbers of women in reality having gone into a range of jobs.¹²² (This is also largely true of the female characters in the plays discussed so far, though Lady Dromondy, Ermytrude, and the 'Lady' in *Augustus* are all depicted as matching or exceeding male characters' competence and intelligence).¹²³ Even so, *Billeted* and *Poached* also privilege flexible attitudes to conventions of social and romantic interaction and, set in substitute domestic environments for servicemen away from home, to domestic space itself. One pre-war genre they echo is domestic farce, which was known for comic treatment of sexual and romantic relationships, the kind of humour that Freud understands as breaking through psychic censorship. There is a similar balance to that discussed in relation to Galsworthy's and Shaw's texts: the balance involved in taking a safe, non-serious approach to wartime disruption. The

¹²¹ F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood, *Billeted: A Comedy in Three Acts* (1917) (London: Samuel French, 1920); Gertrude Jennings, *Poached Eggs and Pearls: A Canteen Comedy in Two Scenes* (1916) (London: Samuel French, 1917).

¹²² Eltis, 'Sex-War', p. 103.

¹²³ Gertrude Kingston, who was active in the suffrage movement, played Ermytrude (Kate Steedman, 'Kingston, Gertrude [real name Gertrude Angela Kohnstamm] (1862–1937)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004 [accessed 15 February 2018]).

dramas deal with inter-class, inter-gender contact in ways that invite levity and encourage acceptance of changes to the domestic and sexual status quo by portraying these alterations as necessary for the British war effort.

Poached is set in a canteen for servicemen run by aristocratic women under the management of 'the Duchess'. The play is concerned with relations between the sexes and between classes, the plot centring on one of the waitresses, 'Lady Clara', and her secret relationship with Jimmie, an airman. Clara and Jimmie's illicit romance is eventually revealed, but all ends well when it is agreed that their courtship's clandestine beginnings can be overlooked. Alongside the farcical plot, much of the play's comedy arises from the newness of the women's contact with servicemen lower in the social hierarchy and, as is explained below, this humour fulfils a Freudian function of avoiding the need to repress 'lustful or hostile' drives.¹²⁴ Two servicemen, for example, enter and discuss the women in class-based and sexualised terms – 'I like that one covered all over wiv diamings and pearls'¹²⁵ – and there is frequent comic reference to class difference. For instance, the men's sensitivity to their position makes them uneasy about complaining when a Miss Deacon accidentally puts polish in their cocoa: it has a taste that they 'ardly like ter mention in ladies' society'.¹²⁶ The incongruity of upper-class women doing manual work is the subject of many of the jokes: Lady Mabel avoids washing-up because she has had a manicure and is dining at the Ritz; Lady Penzance, asked to cut bread, remarks 'my place is really at the desk, but I'll cut bread with pleasure' and, similarly, when told she is wearing too much jewellery, she retorts 'I can't see how I could wear less'.¹²⁷ Miss Deacon is comically incompetent and her representation owes something to the well-established theatrical figure of the lower-class clown. Although she is sufficiently well off to give Jimmie, her nephew, an early inheritance, she is the only canteen worker without a title, and Clara and Mabel gossip over her 'flannel petticoat', a common garment amongst women of non-elite classes.¹²⁸ This portrayal suggests that her class contributes to her role as 'the vital exception' in a play that otherwise shows women behaving with 'model [...] efficiency': she creates the 'necessary leavening in any portrayal of women taking charge'.¹²⁹

The subject of upper- and middle-class women's roles in war is also central to *Billeted*: Betty Taradine provides billets for servicemen in her home, and her estranged husband, Peter, whom she does not initially know with certainty to be alive, is unexpectedly posted to her. All eventually ends happily, with Betty and Peter reconciled. The play's humour again arises from contact between characters of different sexes whom the war has brought together, as well as from the heroine's failings, gender stereotype, and badinage about the institution of marriage. Betty is represented, with light mockery, as unable to manage money – a parallel with Deacon's comic incompetency. Her ineptitude in this area in

¹²⁴ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

¹²⁵ Jennings, *Poached*, p. 15.

¹²⁶ Jennings, *Poached*, p. 15.

¹²⁷ Jennings, *Poached*, pp. 7–8, 12, 14.

¹²⁸ Jennings, *Poached*, p. 9; Lucie Whitmore, University of Glasgow, private correspondence.

¹²⁹ Eltis, 'Sex-War', p. 111.

fact caused her separation from Peter and their eventual reconciliation corrects this, with Peter offering financial stability. It is telling, furthermore, that one of the few references to women's industrial war work to appear in any of the plays discussed is a comment that derides such employment as unfeminine. Betty's cook informs her: 'My brother, who works up north in one of these factories [...] – 'e told me about them as worked up there. Not women at all 'e said, [...] all as flat as 'addicks'.¹³⁰ Elsewhere, Miss Liptrott, the village vicar's sister, is ridiculed for her prudery, contributing to the comic back-and-forth over the institution of marriage. Miss Liptrott is shocked, for example, that Betty received several proposals when entertaining soldiers on leave, believing that 'A woman does not allow a man to propose unless she intends to accept him', whereas for Betty's friend Penelope 'a proposal is but indefinitely related to marriage'.¹³¹ Similar moments include: Penelope's judgement, before Peter's arrival, that it is 'too ridiculous' for Betty's husband to 'interfere like this when he isn't here. It's as bad as if he really were here'; Reverend Liptrott's ironic comment on his sister's concern that Peter is alive – 'Let us hope for the best and assume that he is dead'; Peter's suggestion that marriage is only a 'harbour and an anchorage' in 'the celibate view' – for a woman 'there is always a choice of harbours'; and Peter's retort when Betty accuses him of having no respect for her – 'should I have married you if I had?'¹³²

Billeted and *Poached* celebrate the kind of behaviour and interactions that, unconventional or unfamiliar in peacetime, the war makes available and encourages. Once again, the Freudian model of joking helps to elucidate how the comedy works here. Reflecting Galsworthy's and Shaw's plays, *Poached* includes tendentious joking directed towards the upper-class women because they are authority figures – and because they are women – the jokes described above allowing access to both lustful and aggressive sources of pleasure that would usually be obstructed by processes of repression.¹³³ The many jokes about marriage in *Billeted* follow the same pattern, though in this case the focus is more on the sexually taboo. However, both plays' humour is most aggressively pointed when it comes to women who do not conform to patriotic wartime behaviour. Penzance, as has been seen, is ridiculed for sticking rigidly to the trappings of her class identity (wearing jewellery, being reluctant to do manual labour), and she is also depicted trying to frustrate Clara and Jimmie's romance out of jealousy – hypocritically, since it is hinted that she has a disreputable past.¹³⁴ Sympathy is with the young couple who, thrown together by the war, break class boundaries. Miss Liptrott, too, is portrayed as being jealous of male attention, her inability to 'achieve' a husband makes her conservative perspective on marriage and social interaction appear ill-founded: her belief that it is improper for the servicemen to stay at Betty's house is mocked as old-fashioned and pompous. It would therefore be too strong, in relation to either *Billeted* or *Poached*, to echo Kosok's assessment that the former shows no engagement with the issues of the day: he describes *Billeted* as a 'straightforward' comedy with 'farcical elements' and no 'pretence'

¹³⁰ Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, p. 50.

¹³¹ Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, pp. 11–12.

¹³² Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, pp. 17, 10, 25, 43, 62, 47.

¹³³ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

¹³⁴ Jennings, *Poached*, pp. 16, 24–25, 30, 42.

towards ‘discussing weighty problems’.¹³⁵ Both dramas are light rather than grave or, to use Kosok’s term, ‘weighty’, but they do engage with potential problems related to the war’s effect on women’s work and the domestic sphere, as well as suggesting responses to them: inter-class interaction and changes to women’s lives are presented as necessary during the conflict.

Humour again functions in the plays to make potentially provocative subjects and situations appear less controversial. *Billeted* is similar to other examples of the ‘returning soldier’ genre that developed during the war. Based on the trope of servicemen arriving home unexpectedly, this genre addressed potential disjunctions between the lives of servicemen and their civilian loved ones, often to farcical effect.¹³⁶ As the censor’s report for another such drama, W. Somerset Maugham’s *Home and Beauty* (1919), suggests, these were ‘playfully written’ texts that presented situations ‘which if handled realistically would be [...] very serious’.¹³⁷ A reviewer for the *Play Pictorial* echoed his sentiment: if the heroine were taken ‘seriously’, s/he wrote, ‘we should be disgusted’.¹³⁸ *Billeted* is less risqué than the plot of Maugham’s work, in which the protagonist marries the best friend of her husband before divorcing him for a third man.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, as Miss Liptrott’s disapproval indicates, Betty’s decision to live alone and as if unmarried speaks of taboos about female freedom and sexual freedom that, treated humorously, turn into Freudian tendentious jokes. Without such jokes ‘coarse smut’ would cause us to ‘feel ashamed or it would seem to us disgusting’.¹⁴⁰ Audiences’ potential ‘disgust’ at the subject matter in *Billeted* is bracketed off by the amusement the play invites. Again, this suggests the workings of minor emotions: rather than experiencing the kind of strong feelings – feelings that, to borrow a term from the reviewer above, would be powerful enough to be taken ‘seriously’ – audiences are asked to feel a smaller sense of levity. The changes introduced by the war are presented as entertainingly farcical disruptions, not as cause for concern.

Both *Billeted* and *Poached* continue the style in which romance and female experience had been staged before 1914. The plays resemble in particular the genre of domestic farce, which explored, in Jacky Bratton’s words, ‘the old comedy of relations between the sexes and between classes’.¹⁴¹ Such dramas could involve characters who expressed feminist views, and wives who demanded that their husbands atone for poor behaviour. They generally ended, as in the two war plays discussed here, with the reinstatement of domestic convention and calm.¹⁴² For example, Arthur Wing Pinero’s *The Schoolmistress* (1886), to borrow from the summary given in *The Theatre*, revolves around Miss Dyott, ‘head of a select ladies’ school, who has somewhat rashly married an impecunious “swell”, the Hon. Vere Queckett, and finds him rather an expensive luxury’. To make up for this, she ‘takes an engagement

¹³⁵ Kosok, p. 34.

¹³⁶ Kosok, p. 42.

¹³⁷ Ernest Bendall, report, *Home and Beauty*, LCPCorr 1919/2211.

¹³⁸ ‘Home and Beauty’, *Play Pictorial*, 35 (1919), 94.

¹³⁹ W. Somerset Maugham, *Home and Beauty* (1915), in *For Services Rendered, The Letter, Home and Beauty* (London: Pan Books, 1980), pp. 157–237.

¹⁴⁰ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 101.

¹⁴¹ Bratton, ‘The Music Hall’, in Powell, pp. 164–82 (p. 172).

¹⁴² Booth, *Theatre*, p 191.

as *prima donna* in a comic opera'. Mr Queckett, meanwhile, 'determines to give a bachelor party at the house', and, 'detected by a governess-pupil and the other young ladies, who are also going to give a party, he is made to preside over a combined feast', at which celebration arrives 'not only the young husband of a girlish bride [Dinah Rankling], who is still a pupil at the school, but positively also her father, Admiral Rankling'. Miss Dyott eventually 'appears upon the scene in full stage costume' and, as the playwright 'gather[s] up the threads of his plot', we 'see how Mrs Rankling, egged on by Miss Dyott, turns on her ferocious husband; how Queckett has a very bad time of it; how the young bride and bridegroom win pardon; and how the governess-pupil gains a husband'.¹⁴³ Jokes in this drama of a similar style to those in the wartime plays include Dinah's assertion, describing her romance, that 'love came very gradually. We were introduced at about ten o'clock, and I didn't feel really drawn to him till long after eleven'; a discussion early in the play about Dinah – 'Now why is *she* to spend her Exmas [sic] at our College [...] || Oh, she's been fallin' in love or something, and has got to be locked up'; and a discussion of Dinah's illicit marriage that captures how rebellion is mixed with movement towards domestic bliss: 'Haven't we sworn to help Dinah Rankling with our last breath? Haven't we sworn to free her from the chains of tyranny and oppression, and never to eat much till we have seen her safely and happily by her husband's side!'¹⁴⁴ Similar styles of humour were found in variety theatre, which addressed topical issues, generally resolving these 'in the interests of dominant social groups'.¹⁴⁵ As already noted, the war plays discussed end with triumph for the institution of marriage accompanied by financial solvency. Betty and Peter's reunion halts Betty's problems with money, and Clara and Jimmie's inter-class romance only comes to fruition once they receive the Duchess' sanction and inheritance money from Deacon. Moreover, the 'challenge' to the domestic space in *Billeted* that the arrival of servicemen seems to present turns out not to be a challenge at all, but rather the reinstatement of domestic order: the return of an estranged husband.

Though the plays contain, as has been seen, moments of Freudian tendentious joking that might circumvent psychological censors, the humour in *Poached* and *Billeted* cannot be said to sneak subversive topics past the literal censor, and nor do they test the boundaries of what could be said in jest in the way that Shaw does especially. Underlying debates about censorship before the war was the question of what the function of theatre should be, with those who thought it should primarily provide light entertainment and amusement more likely to be in favour of censorship, while those opposed to censorship 'argued that theatre had a higher function than to entertain'.¹⁴⁶ Commentators in favour of women's suffrage, for example, pointed out that 'low' and 'coarse' jokes were regularly performed, and yet works by authors such as Brieux and Henrik Ibsen were refused licences.¹⁴⁷ Similarly to the censors'

¹⁴³ H. Savile Clarke, 'The Schoolmistress', *The Theatre*, 7 May 1886, pp. 268–70 (p. 269). The play was first produced in March 1886 and ran for 290 performances (Malcolm Salaman, 'Introductory Note', in *The Schoolmistress: A Farce in Three Acts* [1886] [Boston: W. H. Baker & Co., 1894], p. 5).

¹⁴⁴ Arthur W. Pinero, *The Schoolmistress: A Farce in Three Acts* (1886) (Boston: W. H. Baker & Co., 1894), pp. 18, 11, 15.

¹⁴⁵ Russell, p. 81.

¹⁴⁶ Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁷ Sheila Stowell, 'Suffrage Critics and Political Action: A Feminist Agenda', in Booth and Kaplan, pp. 166–84 (p. 171–72).

reaction to Galsworthy's work, one focus of the readers' reports for *Poached* and *Billeted* is their comedy, and there is a sense that their lightness was seen as non-threatening. Ernest Bendall, Street's fellow reader, described *Poached* as 'light and thin but quite amusing', concluding that the 'satirical fun is quite good-natured and free from any lapse of taste'.¹⁴⁸ Street was more enthusiastic about *Billeted*, characterising it as a 'charming comedy' with 'often witty' dialogue.¹⁴⁹ As discussed above, the provocation of amusement can work to evade repression, opening up new sources of pleasure, but addressing taboos in this manner, as Ngai's theory of ugly feelings elucidates, may also give rise to the kind of minor feelings that are divorced from extreme provocation and from action – in this sense serving to make taboo subject matter less subversive. The humour in *Poached* and *Billeted*, similarly to the domestic farce genre more broadly, makes potentially incendiary, controversial subjects (seem) safer.

Jennings' pre-war comedies in particular foreshadow this tension between the safe and the progressive. Her earlier plays depict class inequality, joke about conventions of marriage and gender, and end with the triumph of conventional relationships. This is true, for example, of *Between the Soup and the Savoury* (the Playhouse, London, 1910), *The Rest Cure* (Vaudeville Theatre, London, March 1914), *Our Nervous System*, subsequently retitled *The Pros and Cons* (Playhouse, London, 1911), and *Acid Drops* (Royalty Theatre, London, February 1914).¹⁵⁰ The latter, to give a flavour of these works, is set in a women's workhouse sick ward, in which there develops a romance between Flora, a charitable visitor, and a reverend. When not bickering about the sweets Flora has brought, the women on the ward gossip about the couple. At one humorous moment Flora explains that 'we don't all *want* to get married nowadays', but by the end of the drama she is nevertheless very happy to be engaged.¹⁵¹ Some of Harwood's pre-war work, in contrast, was much more daring than *Billeted*, reflecting how, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, more conservative, lighter theatre tended to be favoured during the war. In particular, *Honour Thy Father* (1912) revolves around a woman forced by socio-economic pressures to support her family by working as a prostitute.¹⁵² Tennyson Jesse was not extensively involved in theatre before 1914, though her work did appear on the stage, in collaboration with Harwood, in the form of a theatrical adaptation of her short story *The Mask* (1912), a tale that mixes elements of horror and crime fiction.¹⁵³ It is, however, worth noting that Tennyson Jesse in 1918 created an account of women's war work that, similarly to *Billeted*, suggested that such labour should not cause concern. *The Sword of Deborah: First-hand Impressions of the British Women's Army in France* was written, as she states in the foreword, 'at the request of the Ministry of Information' to raise awareness of women's war

¹⁴⁸ Bendall, report, *Poached Eggs and Pearls*, LC 1916/28.

¹⁴⁹ Street, report, *Billeted*, LC 1917/15.

¹⁵⁰ Jennings, *Between the Soup and the Savoury* (London: Samuel French, 1910); Jennings, *The Rest Cure*, in *Four One Act Plays* (London: Samuel French, 1914), pp. 11–36; Jennings, *The Pros and Cons*, in *Four One Act Plays* (1911) (London: Samuel French, 1914), pp. 59–84; Jennings, *Acid Drops* (London: Samuel French, 1914).

¹⁵¹ Jennings, *Acid Drops*, p. 14.

¹⁵² Harwood, *Honour Thy Father* (1912), in *Three One-Act Plays* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1926), pp. 27–57.

¹⁵³ Tennyson Jesse and Harwood, *The Mask* (1912/13), in *Three One-Act Plays*, pp. 7–26.

work in France as ‘we are all struggling back into our chiffons’.¹⁵⁴ She declares that ‘I am not [...] a feminist’, and insists that women’s overseas work did not involve sexual impropriety or threaten traditional gender roles.¹⁵⁵ She imagines the workers’ ‘eagerness’ to buy ‘pretty clothes again’, stressing ‘how unchangedly woman they had all remained’.¹⁵⁶

As noted above, the topics and views addressed in *Poached* and *Billeted* do not challenge the limits of what could be expressed on stage, even humorously, to the extent seen in the dramas discussed in the previous section, in particular Shaw’s; however, the humour in both of these lighter comedies does still involve tensions between orthodoxy and subversion, safety and provocation, with generic conventions playing a large part in these dualities and the dramas’ receptions by the censors. The plays are wartime manifestations of the domestic farce genre which, along with other types of comic drama, was established by 1914 as a setting in which relatively liberal comic treatment of sex and gender, romance and marriage, took on the Freudian function of opening sources of pleasure – in this case the indulgence of sexual ‘instincts’ – that audiences would not usually be able to access. Humour in *Poached* and *Billeted* in addition makes the changes to domestic life brought about by the conflict appear, reassuringly, as opportunities rather than cause for anxiety. The tendentious joking in both plays contributes to the privileging of those characters who embrace the new situations to which the conflict gives rise. Humour in this sense is a corrective that encourages patriotic activity: the heroines are those who thrive in response to new wartime work and relationships, the villains those who resist such novelty.

4.3 ‘You’ll find him different’: Wartime Masculinity and Male Relationships.¹⁵⁷

The dramas discussed below approach a range of different masculine experiences and relationships in the wartime context. My focus is on Collins’ *The Conscienceless Objector* (*Conscienceless*, London Hippodrome, 1916), Milne’s *The Boy Comes Home: A Comedy in One Act* (*Boy*, Victoria Palace, London, September 1918), and two plays by Barrie – *The New Word* (*New Word*, Duke of York’s Theatre, London, 1915) and *A Well-Remembered Voice* (*Well-Remembered*, Wyndham’s Theatre, London, June 1918).¹⁵⁸ Humour in these dramas encourages the adoption of work, attitudes, and types of masculine identity deemed to be dutiful responses to the conflict, but also emerges from and/or relates to serious and potentially uncomfortable subjects: death and grief, reversals of domestic power dynamics, and concerns with what kinds of masculinity the war required, adding to the list of the potentially provoking subjects given humorous treatment on the wartime stage. Such humour functions in the Freudian sense of replacing, or modifying, negative feelings, and at times reflects the nature of

¹⁵⁴ Tennyson Jesse, *The Sword of Deborah: First-Hand Impressions of the British Women’s Army in France* (London: Heinemann, 1918).

¹⁵⁵ Tennyson Jesse, *Deborah*, pp. 7, 47–48.

¹⁵⁶ Tennyson Jesse, *Deborah*, p. 132.

¹⁵⁷ Milne, *The Boy Comes Home* (1918), in *First Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), pp. 105–28 (p. 113).

¹⁵⁸ Sewell Collins was born in the U.S., but his work was performed in the U.K.

Sewell Collins, *The Conscienceless Objector*, LC Plays 1916/5; Milne, *The Boy Comes Home*, LC Plays 1918/16; Barrie, *The New Word* (1915), in *Echoes of the War* (1918) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), pp. 65–108; Barrie, *A Well-Remembered Voice* (1918), in *Echoes*, pp. 143–88.

the gallows-humour that Freud admires. Once again, humour holds in balance the provocative and the permissible, the challenging and the reassuring, depicting the concerns of the day in a way suitable to the contested space of the stage.

Performed in 1916 after the Military Service Act introduced conscription, *Conscienceless* depicts three tribunals for men requesting military exemption. Greatest attention is given to the third applicant, Spratt, a conscientious objector, whose character Collins bases on homophobic stereotype. He is a:

little worm of a person. Neatly dressed, with a collar much too big for him and his hair gummed with brilliantine. He minces up to the table and stands examining his nails which he polishes with a silk handkerchief.¹⁵⁹

He speaks in a ‘high, almost feminine voice’, and gives his occupation as a ‘cucumber polisher [...] I’m an expert in removing a – what one might call the warts from cucumbers’, the connotations of which role are foreshadowed by the first applicant’s job as a ‘manufacturer of powder puffs’.¹⁶⁰ The committee unsuccessfully attempts to make Spratt admit that he would use force under certain circumstances, and initially grants his exemption. Spratt, however, displays an extraordinary ability to fight when a sergeant on the tribunal punches him, and he is ‘Referred to the Lord Kitchener – with recommendation!’¹⁶¹ A large degree of Collins’ humour is satirical and corrective. Foppish, pacifist, and – as touched on below – subject to his wife’s authority, Spratt is the antithesis of privileged, heroic military identity.¹⁶² The sergeant in particular mocks him, for example when Spratt explains ‘I don’t believe in taking life’ the sergeant replies ‘Seems to me he takes life pretty easily’.¹⁶³ Such satire has the antagonistic quality of the ridicule discussed in superiority theories, a ‘species of joy mingled with hatred’, according to which we are ‘delighted by the evils that befall [others], and regard them as deserved’.¹⁶⁴ Such ridicule was at the less serious end of the spectrum of aggression and violence that was directed towards conscientious objectors during the war. Collins’ titular pun was not original – jokes about ‘conscienceless’ objectors were common in the British press – and the depiction of Spratt reflects representations of these men found elsewhere as being, in Bibbings’ words, ‘suspected of sexual inversion’.¹⁶⁵ Conscientious objectors and their views were sufficiently provocative during the war for these men to lose relationships with friends and family, to be refused employment and promotion, and to be subjected to ‘derision,

¹⁵⁹ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁰ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, pp. 5, 3. ‘Powder puff’ referred to ‘A man who pays excessive attention to his appearance, a fop; an effeminate man (frequently with suggestion of homosexuality)’. (‘Powder Puff, N. and Adj.’, *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 2018 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/149158> [accessed 16 August 2018]).

¹⁶¹ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁶² Meyer, *Men of War*, p. 2.

¹⁶³ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ Descartes, p. 268.

¹⁶⁵ Bibbings, p. 89. Examples of ‘conscienceless’ jokes: ‘Home Enemies’, *The Wells Journal*, 10 March 1916, p. 5; ‘In the Limelight’, *Liverpool Echo*, 24 March 1916.

hatred and violence'.¹⁶⁶ In this context, Freud's model of tendentious joking is especially revealing: this is one instance in which there is a particularly strong link between humour and aggression. Collins' play offers a chance for those who felt resentment towards conscientious objectors to indulge this drive, as well as presenting such indulgence as a new source of pleasure to audience members not already inclined to such antagonism.

Spratt does, though, give several witty responses to the panel's questions, briefly reversing the direction of the joke and subverting the assumptions on which his interrogation is based. Asked what he would do if a man were to beat his wife, Spratt says 'Feel very sorry for him'.¹⁶⁷ When probed over whether he would attempt to stop enemy soldiers from torching his home, he replies 'No, my home is insured', counteracting military bombast with a common-sense part of domestic life.¹⁶⁸ Strikingly, his retorts undermine key arguments against conscientious objection. The moment in which he declares opposition to killing, depending on the line's delivery, may even act as an arresting reminder of the seriousness of what he is being asked to do: Spratt would not attempt to destroy a Zeppelin because 'I might kill some of the human beings inside it. I don't believe in taking life'.¹⁶⁹ This is similar to the argument against armed hostilities – both German and British – obliquely articulated in *Inca*, and to Lemmy's expression of his views in *Foundations*. Spratt's opinions contradict the status quo, but make it onstage via inclusion in a work that otherwise ridicules him, though Collins' inclusion of Spratt's ideas is an inadvertent subversion. That is, Collins does not promote a sympathetic perspective on conscientious objection; rather, the text has the potential to take on a life of its own once performed.

The reader's report on the play supports the idea that it contains a mixture of the safe and the incendiary. Street judges that the "'conscientious objector" is fair game', the casualness of which comment, given how Juvenalian Collins' satire is, suggesting the permissibility of ridiculing pacifists. Sensitive to humour's ability to work in different ideological directions within the same play, Street was more concerned with the representation of the committee: aware that public interest in the hearings meant they could 'hardly be excluded from the purview of the stage', he seeks to protect them – 'it is not desirable that too much fun should be made out of the tribunals'. He objects to what he calls the chair's 'dubious' line: the second applicant is worried about leaving his children – attractive young women – and the chair declares that if the country does not provide for them, 'the committee will' (Collins' emphasis).¹⁷⁰ Street judges that it is 'not worth cutting, but the piece would be better without the incident, which may be thought derogatory to the tribunals'.¹⁷¹ This is one instance in which the Freudian tendentious joke is sufficiently risqué that it almost prevents Collins from getting away with the sexual reference and the irreverent treatment of authority. Street's vaguely-stated discomfort over

¹⁶⁶ Bibbings, pp. 66–67, 69.

¹⁶⁷ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, pp. 6, 8.

¹⁶⁸ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁹ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, p. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Sewell Collins, *Conscienceless*, p. 4.

¹⁷¹ Street, report, *The Conscienceless Objector*, LC Plays 1916/5.

licensing the work, moreover, contrasting his usual willingness to explain suspicions, hints at the inflammatory nature of Spratt's ridicule: Street mysteriously notes that his superiors may take 'a different view' from his own. Although the subject of homosexuality was banned, it was ambiguous whether playwrights could present characters 'accused' of homosexuality 'but where this is denied and remains unproven', and Street may be unwilling to mention homosexuality in relation to Spratt's characterisation.¹⁷² This is the kind of absence that Freud discusses when outlining overlaps between psychic and literal censorship, the literal ban on references to homosexuality reflecting onto Street's 'approximation and allusion': the satirical representation of Spratt touches on a subject sufficiently taboo that it even leaves gaps in the censor's report.¹⁷³ The homophobic ridicule in the drama is a good illustration of the tension in theatrical humour that has emerged in this chapter: the tension involved in presenting conservative perspectives on provocative subjects; the question of whether humorous representation makes potentially incendiary topics less radical. Or, to reverse this, the question of whether conservative points of view can still be deemed safe if the subject discussed breaks the rules of which topics could officially be performed.

Collins' perspective that the most desirable masculine response to the war was to enlist is paralleled in Milne's *Boy*. Set 'the day after the war', twenty-three year old Philip, having gained maturity and self-assurance, returns to his aunt and uncle (Emily and James), challenging the authority of the latter by breaking domestic conventions. James dreams that Philip refuses to join the family business, threatening him with weapons brought back from the front until the older man concedes. The humour is at James' expense: having faced angry Brigadiers, Philip is no longer impressed by James' attempts to assert his dominance. Philip toys with a revolver, contemplating aloud 'that there are about a hundred thousand people in England' who are 'accustomed' to these guns and 'who have nobody to practise on now', adding 'You mustn't think that after five years of war one has quite the same ideas about the sanctity of human life'.¹⁷⁴ He demonstrates James' fear by suggesting a fair fight (offering him a bomb he is too afraid to touch), tricks James into standing to attention, and threatens to bring out his gun daily until allowed to forge his own career: 'Fear – it's a horrible thing. I've had nearly five years of it'.¹⁷⁵

The audience is encouraged to sympathise with Philip, invited to be in on the joke of putting an imperious non-combatant in his new, post-war place. To use Freud's terms, Milne's humour invites audience members to take pleasure in the kind of violence that Philip threatens – a kind of pleasure that would normally be obstructed by psychological repression – appealing in particular to anyone who might share Philip's views on the freedoms that returning servicemen should enjoy. Similarly to the concerns

¹⁷² Nicholson, 'Getting Away', p. 109. 'Until 1958 the Lord Chamberlain maintained an absolute ban on homosexuality as a stage theme' (John Johnston, p. 171).

¹⁷³ Freud, 'Dreams', p. 171.

¹⁷⁴ Milne, *Boy*, LC Plays, p. 19. In the typescript, references to 'four years' have been altered to 'five years'. The published version uses 'four years'. (Milne, *Boy*, LC Plays, p. 20; Milne, *Boy*, in *First Plays*, p. 122).

¹⁷⁵ Milne, *Boy*, LC Plays, p. 22.

expressed in *Foundations* that servicemen should not face unemployment and poverty on their return, moreover, Philip's threats of violence hint at fears of how those trained in combat may react if left without work – at anxieties that the conflict may have a brutalising effect.¹⁷⁶ The adult, authoritative masculinity Philip has adopted is after all based on his familiarity with physical force and destruction: in one solemn moment he tells James that he 'became twenty-five....or thirty-five....or forty-five' on the Somme.¹⁷⁷ Milne's comedy thus works in the way that Freud identifies when describing the category of amusement he labels humour, in this case mirth replacing the negative emotions of anxiety or fear. The invitations to amusement in Milne's play also relate to another, equally important, subject that has similar potential to cause anxiety: the ways in which the conflict could alter male relationships. Milne's suggestion that older men who did not fight would have to relinquish power to younger men who did is an emotive one, playing on anxieties surrounding masculine and familial hierarchies. As the *Era*'s reviewer recommended, 'If there are any [...] iron-willed parents and guardians' who still believe 'they will be able to exert pre-war authority when the boys get back, they had better go to the Victoria Palace' to see 'Mr A. A. Milne's comedy [...] and be warned in time'.¹⁷⁸ Here, too, the amusement on offer is the kind of pleasure that Freud sees as arising when energy is saved that would otherwise have been spent on negative emotion.¹⁷⁹ The plays by Barrie explored below take account of the war's effects on relationships between fathers and sons, and this is Milne's concern as well. As the comment from the *Era*'s reviewer indicates, *Boy* draws attention to, and solicits humour from, potential changes in domestic life that could cause friction and anxiety, with older men having to come to terms with a loss of power in favour of younger men who had fought.

Humour's function of encouraging levity in this manner means that it facilitates the performance of subjects that might not otherwise have been seen. It is difficult to imagine the Lord Chamberlain's readers licensing as easily as Bendall did *Boy* a drama that depicts seriously a servicemen threatening his family with weapons picked up in the war.¹⁸⁰ Bendall's report does not indicate any suspicions, even though the typescript he assessed has hand-written alterations that make it ambiguous whether James' experience was in fact a dream, lessening the distance of the action from unreality.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, his judgement that the play is generally innocuous is correct. Similarly to Galsworthy's drama, *Boy* presents a political warning against disorder, while its Freudian humour discourages audiences from being overly roused by potentially provocative subjects, replacing feelings such as aggression and anxiety with amusement.

¹⁷⁶ This was itself an important political issue: employment was one of the problems the British government faced in planning for peacetime. (Carolyn Malone, 'A Job Fit for Heroes? Disabled Veterans, the Arts and Crafts Movement and Social Reconstruction in Post-World War I Britain', *First World War Studies*, 4 [2013], 201–217 [p. 202]).

¹⁷⁷ Milne, *Boy*, LC Plays, p. 14.

¹⁷⁸ 'Next Week's Calls', *Era*, 11 September 1918, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ Freud, *Jokes*, p. 229.

¹⁸⁰ Bendall, Report, *The Boy Comes Home*, LC Plays 1918/16.

¹⁸¹ Milne, *Boy*, LC Plays, pp. 11, 26–27.

The war's effects on family dynamics are also at stake in Barrie's *New Word*. Barrie addresses the relationship between war and new modes of expression, a relationship he explores in order to portray how the conflict might affect father-son interaction. Roger, the son of the Torrance household, has become a second lieutenant and is offstage donning his uniform when the action starts. After the 'Uniform comes forward with Roger inside it' Mrs Torrance, having instructed her husband to show Roger some parental warmth, leaves them alone.¹⁸² Though they treat their encounter as an ordeal ('Father and son! He'll bolt; or if he doesn't, I will', says Mr Torrance), they decide that they do have affection for each other, and the drama concludes with Roger prefacing 'father' with the novel qualification 'dear'.¹⁸³ Mr Torrance 'casts all sense of decency to the winds; such is one of the effects of war' finding courage, because 'There is a war on', to say 'I'm going to cast a grenade into the middle of you [...] I'm fond of you'.¹⁸⁴ In return, Roger admits 'I sometimes – bragged about you at school'.¹⁸⁵ The conflict 'makes us know all new things', including that Roger is 'the head of the house now', which statement and its emotional weight are then partially reversed: Mr Torrance says 'I'll have to be jolly respectful', and Roger replies, with teenaged embarrassment, 'Shut up, father!'¹⁸⁶ As in Milne's *Boy*, the humour here is partially didactic, pressing fathers and sons to cast off their reticence urgently: Roger and other second lieutenants may not return.

Fittingly enough, in a play that thematises barriers to expression, Barrie does not state explicitly what the 'new word' is. Another candidate is 'second lieutenant', as novel an appellation for Roger as 'dear' is for his father. This term and the Torrances' comic reactions to it help to articulate a sense of nation-ness, as well as contributing to the depiction of the war's domestic impact. Roger's sister announces him in his uniform with different forms of military and familial naming: 'Allow me to introduce Second Lieutenant Torrance of the Royal Sussex. Father – your son; Second Lieutenant Torrance – your father. Mother – your little Rogie'.¹⁸⁷ When she lists the 'fine words' she has noticed in military vocabulary ('Platoon! Dragoon! [...] Maréchal de France'), Mrs Torrance replies 'there is nothing so nice as Second Lieutenant' – in the 1936 edition of Barrie's plays her line is 'there is no word so nice as 2nd Lieutenant'.¹⁸⁸ Such interest in new language is most explicit in Mr Torrance's reflection that before the war 'we were so little of a military nation that most of us didn't know there *were* Second Lieutenants': 'It is like a new word to us – one, I dare say, of many that the war will add to our language', his plural pronouns reaching beyond his own family.¹⁸⁹ Barrie likely chose the rank of second lieutenant for personal reasons: George Llewelyn Davies, to whom he was guardian and who was one of the boys

¹⁸² Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, pp. 75–76, 86.

¹⁸³ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, pp. 75, 107.

¹⁸⁴ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, pp. 89, 92.

¹⁸⁵ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, p. 92.

¹⁸⁶ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, pp. 97–98.

¹⁸⁷ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, p. 76.

¹⁸⁸ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, p. 81; Barrie, *New Word* (1915), in *The Plays of J. M. Barrie in One Volume* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), pp. 739–57 (p. 745).

¹⁸⁹ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, p. 98.

that inspired *Peter Pan* (1904), served as a second lieutenant and was killed in March 1915.¹⁹⁰ The rank, however, also fits the play's everyman narrative: Barrie's opening stage directions state 'Any room nowadays must be the scene, for any father and son are the *dramatis personae*'.¹⁹¹ While the backgrounds of those who became second lieutenants changed during the war and depended on individual units, the role was associated with young, upper-middle class men.¹⁹² These are the kind of men with whom Barrie's audience might be very familiar, West End theatre generally being patronised by London's middle classes and middle-class visitors to the capital.¹⁹³ Kubly, briefly acknowledging the humour in Barrie's war plays, argues that it prevented audiences from recognising that he depicted 'events happening around them' but, in fact, reviews from the time suggest that the topicality of the Torrances' situation was understood very well.¹⁹⁴ As A. Croom-Johnson of the *Review of Reviews* noted, "'The New Word" is "Second Lieutenant"', around which is 'woven' scenes 'paralleled in thousands of English homes to-day'.¹⁹⁵ The certainty with which he assumes that the new word is 'second lieutenant' speaks to the contemporary pervasiveness of the conflict, the extent to which such military words may have been on many people's minds. The war had a primacy that may be difficult for modern readers to imagine: Kosok, in his brief description of the play, assumes that the new word is 'dear', speaking to his greater distance from the conflict as well as to modern familiarity with masculine expressions of love.¹⁹⁶ Croom-Johnson captures how Barrie's play, similarly to the humorous short stories discussed in Chapter Three, invites a sense of national unity based on shared experience. Again, there is a didactic element here: families are encouraged to accommodate themselves to the conflict's intrusions.

The new words, 'second lieutenant' and 'dear', encapsulate the themes at the play's centre – the war's invasion into the home and the familial and emotional effects of this – themes that have the potential to provoke, but which are presented in ways that invite amusement.¹⁹⁷ Sons going to fight, familial role reversals, and the novelty of the masculine sentimentality could induce such things as terror, grief, and anxiety, but the play's humour encourages audience members to bracket these emotions off, or to save the energy they would normally use by bringing them under 'the control of humour'.¹⁹⁸ Again, humour makes potentially incendiary subjects less controversial, less likely to provoke strong negative

¹⁹⁰ Piers Dudgeon, *Captivated: J. M. Barrie, Daphne Du Maurier and the Dark Side of Neverland* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 207; 'Second Lieutenant Davies, George Llewlyn', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, 2017 <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/456458/>> [accessed 10 November 2017].

¹⁹¹ Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, p. 67.

¹⁹² Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), pp. 212–13.

¹⁹³ Michael Booth, 'East End and West End: Class and Audience in Victorian London', *Theatre Research International*, 2 (1977), 98–103 (p. 99).

¹⁹⁴ Kubly, p. 205.

¹⁹⁵ A. Croom-Johnson, 'The Drama During War-Time: The Two Barries', *The Review of Reviews*, 51 (1915), 348.

¹⁹⁶ Kosok, p. 31.

¹⁹⁷ In published versions there is a moment of political satire: Mrs Torrance comments that had Roger's older brother, who died as a child, been alive, she would have wanted him to fight: 'if it is the noble war they all say it is. [...] Surely they wouldn't deceive mothers'. This comment did not appear in the version of the play submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office, though it is not clear whether it was removed before submission, or added for publication. (Barrie, *New Word*, in *Echoes*, pp. 85–86; Barrie, *New Word*, LC Plays 1915/5).

¹⁹⁸ Freud, *Jokes*, pp. 231–32.

emotions or disapproval. Minor emotions – mild amusement, sympathetic recognition of the awkwardness between father and son – are encouraged in place of stronger feelings. Importantly, though, Barrie’s work does not encourage amusement alone, but involves a mixture of emotional provocations. There is pathos in Roger’s departure: the fact that he is still ‘little Rogie’ to his mother, his defensiveness when teased (‘Shut up, father!’), his reference to schoolboy bragging, and his uniform’s dominance over him all emphasise his youth. To borrow the term used ironically in the title of Milne’s play, he is more of a ‘boy’ than a soldier, making *New Word* a wartime manifestation of Barrie’s career-long interest in childhood and its loss. Barrie uses his subject matter not for humour alone but also to invite other feelings too – sympathy for the young going to fight, pride in them, and apprehension on their behalf.

Well-Remembered could almost be a sequel to *New Word*, the action taking place after a son, Dick Don, has been killed in action. Dick is also a second lieutenant, and also supposedly closer to his mother than his father, and Barrie undermines this assumed hierarchy of parental relationships as he does with the Torrances. Following Mrs Don’s attempt to contact Dick in a séance – a reflection of spiritualism’s popularity at the time – Mr Don is confronted with his son’s spirit who, only able to contact one person, has chosen his father because Mr Don grieves most keenly.¹⁹⁹ The father-son relationship is partially comic; there is a mixture of humour and pathos that ranges from the black to the sentimental. Indeed, significant pathos emerges from the fact that, though Mr Don can see his son, the audience can only hear him: Mr Don is the sole presence on stage for much of the action, emphasising his loss. He is a ‘lonely man’, and it is this that Dick’s humour counteracts.²⁰⁰

The play is a reflection on what both humour and good-humour have to do with grief, and masculine grief in particular. First, as the title, the use of Dick’s disembodied voice, and the séance indicate, there is a concern with communication (a theme shared with *New Word*) – and specifically a concern with dialogue about and with the dead. This includes consideration of humour’s place in such conversations. Mr Don asks his son to tell him ‘about the – the veil. I mean the veil that is drawn between the living and the —’, breaking off before Dick replies ‘The dead? Funny how you jib at that word’.²⁰¹ Like Dick, Barrie is concerned with talking about the dead and with the ‘funniness’ (peculiarity, humorousness) of doing so. The play is imbued with Freudian gallows-humour. To illustrate this kind of humour, Freud gives the example of ‘A rogue who was being led out to execution on a Monday’ and remarks “‘Well, this week’s beginning nicely’”, commenting that it takes humour to make such a joke, to ‘disregard what it is that distinguishes the beginning of this week from others, in denying the distinction which might give rise to motives for quite special emotions’. Freud sees this kind of humour as showing ‘grandeur’ and ‘magnanimity’ because it involves a ‘tenacious hold upon [the joker’s] customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair’. Such grandeur

¹⁹⁹ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, pp. 143–88. For a discussion of spiritualism, see: Winter, *Sites*, pp. 54–55.

²⁰⁰ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, pp. 138–39.

²⁰¹ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 146.

‘appears unmistakably in cases in which our admiration is not inhibited by the circumstances of the humorous person’.²⁰² Barrie very much represents Dick as having the capacity to find humour in death; often this is related to the deceased serviceman insisting on continuity – on refusing to accept that anything should alter because he has faced death – and audiences are encouraged to admire this quality in him.

A good illustration of what is at stake in the funniness of discussing death comes when Mr Don tells his son about some mischief on the part of the family dog: Dick interjects ‘That dog will be the death of me’ and ‘His father shivers’.²⁰³ Dick’s comment, though not a linguistic mistake as such, has the quality of a Freudian slip, the kind of ‘slip of the tongue’ that Freud ‘trace[s] to interference by a half-suppressed idea that lies outside the intended context’, an ‘apparently casual utterance’ revealing thoughts that ‘cannot [...] avoid unintentionally’ coming to light’.²⁰⁴ Freud draws a parallel between such slips and humour, observing that they are sure to evoke ‘amusement’, and in light of this Dick’s comment can be viewed as an inadvertent pun – one that is chilling for his father but potentially amusing to the audience, depending on the line’s delivery.²⁰⁵ The pun’s double meaning articulates a subtle aspect of mourning: especially since the play centres on communication, Dick’s comment draws attention to a sense that, in grief, familiar, seemingly innocuous words could be coloured by loss. While *New Word* addresses the entrance of new military language to the domestic sphere when a son goes away to war, here humour suggests that the conflict has coloured everyday phrases. The moment adds to a broader impression in the play that unexpected reminders of death arise from that which is ostensibly commonplace and innocent: Barrie explores how grief may make the familiar uncanny. The terms ‘death’ and ‘dead’ have such emotional resonance that they can no longer be employed with ease, just as, for example, the set of fishing rods that father and son previously used together become objects of sadness for Mr Don.²⁰⁶

Humour in the play is also, though, presented as a means by which the bereaved could respond to their loss, including the privileging of something very like a stiff upper lip. Dick demands that his father maintains his normal behaviour, in particular that he should keep up a cheerful demeanour. When Dick appears, he states ‘don’t be startled, or anything of that kind. We don’t like that’ and, when Mr Don asks what he wants, he responds ‘keep a bright face’.²⁰⁷ In the play’s published form, furthermore, though not in the Lord Chamberlain’s typescript, ‘the crafty boy’ succeeds ‘in making the father laugh’, and Dick reminds his father ‘What did I say about that face?’, prompting a smile from the older man.²⁰⁸ Dick’s ‘message’ – ‘Pipe!’ – made, in the typescript, as he departs, is his final reminder that Mr Don

²⁰² Freud, *Jokes*, p. 229.

²⁰³ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 145.

²⁰⁴ Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), pp. 53, 83, 80.

²⁰⁵ Freud, *Psychopathology*, p. 94.

²⁰⁶ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 145.

²⁰⁷ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, pp. 139, 141.

²⁰⁸ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 143.

should attempt to continue to take pleasure in life.²⁰⁹ (In the 1936 edition, Dick's last request is 'Face', and in *Echoes of the War* [1918] it is 'Be bright, father').²¹⁰ As in *New Word* and *Boy*, such order-giving involves humorous treatment of father-son role-reversal: 'Look here, sonny, you've got to go on with it. You don't seem to know how interested I am in your future'.²¹¹ Mr Don's attempts to maintain normality ('I try to paint just as before. I go to the club. Dick, I have been to a dinner-party') are met with approval on behalf of the dead in general: 'We like that'.²¹² Focusing attention on the play's most serious aspects, Kubly suggests that Barrie uses Dick to help his audience 'deal with the trauma of loss', which may be true, but Dick's insistence on cheerful stoicism complicates this assessment.²¹³ A comforting thought for those who, as with Mr Don, do not express grief noisily, Dick's imperatives to carry on also have a disquieting edge. The 'face' Dick insists on is reminiscent of the 'FIXED GRIN' that Lewis condemned. The cheerfulness demanded precludes the expression of strong feeling, including strong feeling against the war and/or its continuance.²¹⁴ Barrie's representation of humour, or good humour, suggests that it is a desirable antidote to grief, yet this seems to involve slight dishonesty, a sense that humour may be a pretence – a disguise for the sharpness of the emotions felt in mourning. In this sense, the play diverges from Freud's model of humour: here, humour is more a mechanism for repression than for the 'venting' of emotion or energy that is associated with relief theories. In Ngai's terms, Mr Don finds himself in circumstances in which there are obstructions to him expressing strong emotion – the belief, expressed by his wife, that 'a son is so much more to a mother than to a father', the continuance of a war that demands good morale – and Dick's encouragement that he should maintain good humour contributes to, or highlights, such impediments.²¹⁵

Barrie in fact confronts the difficulties of the relationship between humour and grief, reflecting on and revealing the complexities of responding to loss with humour. Dick's attempts to cheer-up his father founder when he struggles to 'remember something funny' to tell him, an admission that there may not be much that is mirthful about his war experience.²¹⁶ When he does recall an amusing memory, its humorousness is equivocal. He reminds his father of a boy, Wantage, who was teased for being close to his mother:

"She was very fond of him, Dick".

"Oh, I expect no end. Tell her he's killed".

"She knows".

²⁰⁹ Barrie, *A Well-Remembered Voice*, LC Plays 1918/11, p. 29.

²¹⁰ Barrie, *A Well-Remembered Voice*, in *Plays*, pp. 761–81 (p. 780); Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 168.

²¹¹ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 165.

²¹² Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 160.

²¹³ Kubly, p. 203.

²¹⁴ Lewis, 'Manifesto', p. 17; Lewis, 'Constantinople Our Star', p. 11.

²¹⁵ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 156.

²¹⁶ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 169.

“She had got a wire. That isn’t the joke, though. You see he got into a hopeless muddle about which side of the veil he had come out on [...] and just for the lark we didn’t answer”. He chuckles. “I expect he has become a ghost!” With sudden consideration. “Best not tell his mother that”.

Mr Don rises, wincing [...].²¹⁷

What for Dick is a jest is disquieting for his father, an ambiguity reflecting Dick’s own initial confusion, or anxiety, over which aspect of his tale is ‘the joke’. Dick’s comment about keeping the tale from Wantage’s mother, in fact, provides more of a ‘punch line’ than his account of the front-line prank, extending the uncertainty over which part of the dialogue is meant to be ‘something funny’. The exchange also highlights the distance between Dick and his father: as I explain below, humour in the drama is primarily represented as offering a connection between the two men, but this is one moment where it has the opposite effect. Mr Don’s discomfort with the tale prompts an apology infused with pathos: ‘Sorry, father. We are all pretty young, you know, and we can’t help having our fun’.²¹⁸ Taking amusement from Wantage’s misfortune is a privilege of the young and the dead, reflecting Barrie’s broader representation of Dick and his comrades as deceased schoolboys (for example, Dick is guided into the afterlife by a revered older pupil from his school, ‘Ockley who was keeper of the fives’).²¹⁹ Mr Don, middle-aged and alive, cannot join in the laughter, separated from youthful mirth by his longer, continuing life. The prank speaks of Dick’s curtailed development – this is a wartime echo of *Peter Pan* – and it acknowledges that the gap between father and son will never be closed.

For the majority of the play, however, humour provides a connection between the pair, especially because it is presented as a specifically male aspect of mourning. Dick informs his father that ‘[I]f you’re bright’, he will ‘get a good mark for it’, cheerfulness mysteriously providing a direct, beneficial link with the deceased.²²⁰ Humour and laughter in fact become something to fall back on when words fail, adding to the sense that they offer continued attachment to Dick even after his voice fades. Attempting to entertain his father with war stories, Dick comments, ‘There are lots of jokes, but I am such a one for forgetting them’, and ‘laughs boisterously’, as though the non-verbal signal of merriment is needed to maintain his cheerful persona even when he cannot find anything funny to say.²²¹ When Dick reveals that Ockley’s nickname, K.C.M.G., means ‘Kindly Call Me God’, moreover, Mr Don ‘flings back his head; so we know what Dick is doing. They are a hilarious pair’. His laughter disturbs Mrs Don who, unable to see Dick, is ‘aggrieved’ by what she interprets as inappropriate amusement.²²² The father and son’s laughter is rebellious and indecorous, uniting them against the

²¹⁷ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, pp. 169–70.

²¹⁸ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 170.

²¹⁹ The captain of the team in Eton Fives. (Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 169).

²²⁰ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 185.

²²¹ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 169.

²²² Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, pp. 176–77.

misery more usually associated with mourning, and creating a picture of a joyous relationship that helps to explain why Mr Don might be the parent most affected by Dick's death.²²³ Humour in *Well-Remembered* in this light offers an answer to the awkwardness over loosening masculine emotional restraint that was posed in *New Word*: shared humour is a way for fathers and sons to show affection. A commentator writing in 1932 observed that the drama 'points to the different quality of the love of the mother from that of the father, and shows the survival of personality with affection undiminished'.²²⁴ Humour in the play suggests that there are ways of grieving that are particular to the specific relationship being mourned, especially in relation to male bonds.

The reader's report on the play points towards a tension between the provocativeness of using humour to address such a serious, topical experience as grief, and humour's role in creating a poignant picture of mourning. Street draws attention to the drama's unusual subject matter: 'nothing like' the play, 'a conversation between a man and his dead son, has been seen on the stage before'.²²⁵ Indeed, the subject of young men's deaths was so sensitive that the famous line from *Peter Pan* – 'To die will be an awfully big adventure' – was cut from wartime performances.²²⁶ Street raises the possibility that, 'some may find [*Well-Remembered*] irreverent' or 'in dubious taste'.²²⁷ This observation, perhaps, includes the possibility that Barrie's humorous treatment of bereavement could offend. That the published version of the script has more emphasis on maintaining a smile may be evidence that it was less permissible to associate grief with humour during the war.²²⁸ At the same time, the father-son interaction that Barrie's humour creates adds to the 'affecting' quality that made it suitable for performance. Though Street stated that it may 'be questioned if anything so poignant in these times is wisely put on the stage', the drama's affecting nature also contributed to his decision to give it a licence, and to his apparent admiration for it as well. Repeating his earlier adjective, he writes 'In these times it [the play] is especially poignant, and if it were not done with essential reverence it would be intolerable'; 'As it is, it seems to me personally a beautiful and affecting play'; no one 'could question the reverent and sympathetic intention'.²²⁹ Moving away from the Freudian model of amusement, humour here does not avoid censorship by replacing emotion, but by heightening it. Humour could not only facilitate the portrayal of potentially challenging subjects by inviting levity, but also by soliciting other kinds of profound theatrical experience.

Well-Remembered and *New Word* return to Barrie's established interest in youth and age, and their blend of humour with sentimentality and pathos is also typical of the style for which he was famed

²²³ Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 159.

²²⁴ G. E. S. Nice, letter, 'Barrie and the Occult', *The Scotsman*, 28 July 1932, p. 7.

²²⁵ Street, report, *A Well-Remembered Voice*, LC Plays 1918/11.

²²⁶ Chaney, p. 307.

²²⁷ Street, *Well-Remembered*.

²²⁸ In published versions Dick, asked whether his gaiety is real or 'put on to help' his father, admits 'it's half and half'. (Barrie, *Well-Remembered*, in *Echoes*, p. 187).

²²⁹ Street, *Well-Remembered*.

before 1914.²³⁰ As with Galsworthy and Shaw, Barrie had called for reform of censorship, and at times his work shared some of the themes and ambitions of New Drama.²³¹ He argued that playwrights should be allowed to say ‘whether sportively or seriously, what is in them to say’, including expressions of the ‘unconventional’, which ‘to the official mind [...] is a thing suspect’.²³² However, ‘Barrie’s consistent aim was to reach as many people as he could’, and assessments of his writing both before and after 1914 often focused on qualities that added to the broad reach of his plays.²³³ He was celebrated or criticised based on the extent to which his work delivered whimsicality and charm, receiving negative reviews when perceived to abandon them.²³⁴ His works were judged to be ‘full of humour’, ‘sentimental, imaginative’, ‘farc[ical]’, ‘unreal, fantastic’, ‘sentimental comedy’, ‘humorous and whimsical’; they had ‘charm’ and ‘genial humour’.²³⁵ *Peter Pan* was discussed as the epitome of these features: ‘a quaint mingling of pathos and fun’, a ‘panorama of whimsies’, ‘a typical production of the Barrie genius, with all the Barrie humour, the Barrie whimsicality, and the Barrie sentiment’.²³⁶ When his satire and social comment is noted, it tends to be placed in the context of his dramas’ lighter qualities, sometimes with the suggestion that his humour let him get away with provocative subjects. Edith Sichel argued that ‘his malice is so gentle and playful’ that ‘he tricks us into taking it for grace and courtesy’; ‘Mr Barrie has discovered that fantasy is a subtle medium for satire’.²³⁷ The *Speaker* dubbed his writing ‘fantastic satire’, which gave ‘quaint and illuminating’ presentations of folly, ‘delightful entertainment, but clearly the work of a serious and considerable thinker’; a *Times* reviewer described the playwright as ‘our spoiled child’, ‘allowed to do things which would bring stern reproof on other children’: he has done ‘what no one has been allowed to do [...] – bring the contemporary political situation straight on to the stage’.²³⁸ A commentary in the *Fortnightly Review*, similarly, stated that since ‘a well-developed sense of humour implies liberal-minded judgement’, Barrie is ‘allowed to try cases in open court, the hearing

²³⁰ *Peter Pan* is well known for its exploration of youth, but the theme is central to such dramas as *Alice Sit-By-The-Fire* (1905) and *Quality Street* (1901). The continuity between *Boy* and *Conscienceless* and their authors’ pre-war writing is difficult to fathom. Though Milne contributed to *Punch* before 1914, he did not write for the theatre, while there is a lack of information on Collins’ work. Barrie, *Alice Sit-By-The-Fire* (1905) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920); Barrie, *Quality Street* (1901) (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920); Milne ‘Introduction’, *First Plays*, pp. vii–x (p. vii).

²³¹ McDonald, pp. 2–3, 6, 9–10.

²³² Qtd. in Nicholson, *Censorship*, p. 53.

²³³ Chaney, p. 301. Barrie’s association with whimsical amusement was bolstered by a public persona of endearing oddness. One journalist claimed to have been shown an ‘interview pipe’ that Barrie used to impress reporters. (‘“Barrie at Bay: Which Was Brown?” An Interview on the War From *The New York Times*, October 1, 1914’, *New York Times Current History of the European War* [New York, 12 December 1914], pp. 100–02). Gerald du Maurier wrote that when Barrie says ‘the heroine ought to wear a moustache’, there will be reports that the play’s ‘most poignant moment [...] was when Jean decided to shave’ (Gerald Du Maurier, ‘J. M. B’, *The Bookman*, 59 [1920], 108–09 [p. 108]).

²³⁴ ‘Green Room Gossip’, *Daily Mail*, 9 May 1903, p. 2; ‘Duke of York’s’, *Athenaeum*, 12 September 1908, p. 311.

²³⁵ ‘A Scottish Tom Sawyer’, *Glasgow Herald*, 21 October 1896, p. 4; P. C., ‘The Theatre: *The Admirable Crichton*’, *The Speaker: the Liberal Review*, 15 November 1902, pp. 168–69 (p. 168); ‘Mr Barrie’s Way’, *Academy and Literature*, 15 November 1902, p. 525; P. C., ‘The Theatre’, *Speaker: the Liberal Review*, 4 October 1902, pp. 15–16 (p. 16).

²³⁶ W. T. S., ‘Peter Pan’, *Academy and Literature*, 7 January 1905, pp. 19–20 (p. 19); ‘Mr Barrie’s New Play’, *Manchester Courier*, 28 December 1904, p. 4.

²³⁷ Edith Sichel, ‘The Fantastic Element and Mr Barrie’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 April 1903, p. 117.

²³⁸ P. C., ‘The Theatre: *The Admirable Crichton*’, p. 168; ‘Comedy Theatre’, *The Times*, 6 April 1906, p. 10.

of which would in other circumstances be suppressed by that influential defendant, the British public'.²³⁹ Barrie's work before the war had thus merged, in Jonathan Wild's words, 'amusement and spectacle with underlying commentary on [...] present-day society'.²⁴⁰ He had a history of dealing in the kinds of tensions between safe humorousness and challenging subject matter that appear in his wartime plays and those of the other writers discussed in this chapter.

Barrie's, Milne's, and Collins' humour is poised between that which is safe and war-supporting, and that which could cause anxiety and disquiet, and which may not have made it onto the stage in a more serious guise. In each of the texts, humour acts as a corrective in favour of fairly conservative pictures of what wartime masculinity should involve. The satire, ridicule, and lighter jokes in the plays suggest that young men should enlist, that their fathers and father-figures should give them due reverence and affection for their service, and that the bereaved should carry on as if they did not suffer. There are, though, also potentially provocative, or even subversive ideas and subjects in these dramas. These are at points political and social, such as Collins' inclusion of arguments for conscientious objection, and the staging of the theme of homosexuality, albeit in homophobic terms, in the same play. In Barrie's texts especially, the emotional challenges of war themselves become a source of humour: the intrusion of the war into family life, reversals in domestic power dynamics – both of which also feature in Milne's play – the need for fathers and sons to express affection and the difficulties of doing so, and grief. Humour in each of the plays seems to preclude extreme emotional provocation, however; it often acts, as Freud describes, to replace or at least assuage negative feelings. Barrie's works complicate this dynamic a little, his humour's evocation of, to use Street's term, 'poignancy' helping to make his subject matter permissible. It was not only humour's invitations to mirth that could ease the staging of potentially disquieting experiences, it was also humour's capacity to encourage and represent such things as affection. Here, humour helps to evoke a range of emotions, both in terms of the feelings represented onstage, and in terms of what provocations are offered to the audience.

4.4 Conclusion: Humour's Theatrical Balancing Act.

Humour generally contributes to safe points of view in the plays discussed. With the exception of Shaw's dramas, the perspectives that humour promotes work in favour of patriotic, dutiful behaviour, and in Galsworthy's and Milne's cases this extends to the promotion of post-war political stability. When women and men are shown behaving beyond the usual bounds of their gender and social position, they are represented as doing so because the extraordinary circumstances of war demand it. However, less orthodox points of view do surface: Shaw's anti-militarist position in *Inca*, Galsworthy's inclusion of revolutionary ideas in *Foundations*, and Collins' insertion of pacifist arguments in *Conscienceless* (arguments that appear reasonable, apparently inadvertently on Collins' part). In these moments, the

²³⁹ Edith Browne, 'Mr J. M. Barrie's Dramatic and Social Outlook', *Fortnightly Review*, 79 (1906), 920–29 (p. 929).

²⁴⁰ Wild, *Literature of the 1900s*, p. 139.

broad setting of comic plays serves as an innocent-looking cloak for politically charged material. Indeed, humour in all of the dramas considered is associated with subjects that have the potential to be incendiary: the war's effect on women's work, inter-class romance, social inequality, the rules of marriage, alterations to familial hierarchies, conscientious objection, homosexuality, revolution, death, and mourning. Addressing such subjects humorously presents the chance for audience members to release energy that would usually be expended on repressing hostile and sexual drives, allowing them to enjoy these sources of pleasure that are usually obstructed. It is by this Freudian mechanism that playwrights place onto the home-front stage different ideas, emotions, and practical changes that the conflict could bring, exposing them for examination and contemplation, criticism and/or approval. At several points humour is even thematised as a means of expressing that which is potentially provocative. The central joke in *Foundations* revolves around something that cannot be said, but which can be laughed at; *Augustus* champions the freedom to mock; Ermyntrude in *Inca* claims that satire is her only source of power, with Shaw questioning the political efficacy of such humour; in *New Word*, humour arises from Roger's and Mr Torrance's inability to express affection; in *Well-Remembered*, amusement becomes a non-verbal means of mourning, and staying connected to, the dead.

The view that humorous plays were likely to be safer was partly based on the idea that these dramas would not rouse audiences to such strong emotions as offence and anger, the kind of feelings associated with unrest. The plays encourage audiences towards more positive versions of what Ngai terms minor feelings – mild amusement, levity, and light-heartedness. This raises the question of whether challenging topics treated humorously can still be called challenging, an ambiguity that the plays, readers' reports, and reviews leave open. The dramas proffer a balance between depicting experiences that could be incendiary, and presenting these with humour that reduces their provocativeness. With regard to the texts analysed, there is evidence of only a few occasions on which this balance was upset, or nearly upset: the clearest examples are the audience displeasure at *Augustus*, and the dispute over the censor's alterations to *Inca*. The plays' ambiguities created a useful equilibrium between the different demands relating to the production, consumption, and control of theatrical performance. Humorous representation was a fitting mode for theatre, its undecidedness holding in tension the need to address the potentially provocative topics raised by the war, the need to entertain audiences, and the need to avoid attention from censors.

Styles of humour and playwrights' outlooks and reputations to some degree carried through into their responses to the conflict. *Poached* and *Billeted* mirror the mixture found in domestic farce of including the risqué and maintaining the status quo, with Jennings' work reflecting her pre-1914 plays. Preoccupations developed before the war similarly appeared in Barrie's, Galsworthy's, and Shaw's wartime dramas, with the kinds of humour for which Barrie and Shaw had become famed also continuing into their responses to the conflict. As well as paying attention to socially, politically, and emotionally controversial subjects, these playwrights show marked self-consciousness about the relationship between humour and expression, likely because of their earlier involvement with debates

surrounding what could be said on stage. As in the conflict's poetry, trench newspapers, and short stories, echoes of pre-war literature and literary culture sound in wartime theatre. These echoes indicate the robustness of humorous writing, as well as suggesting the continued relevance of questions of literary depiction – questions surrounding theatrical humour's relationship to provocation – that were established long before 1914.

Conclusion:

Changing Perspectives on the Depiction of the Great War

Explaining the subject of this thesis – humorous First World War literature – often gives rise to responses that themselves take the form of jokes. Two common reactions are ‘Is there any?’ and ‘Do you get to talk about *Blackadder*?’ both of which questions are sometimes accompanied, with greater seriousness, by the comment that ‘people must have needed a way to cheer themselves up’. Such reactions demonstrate the extent to which the Great War and its literature are still associated with gravity and weightiness, with that which is exceedingly un-funny. It is assumed that the literature of the war is characterised by solemnity, with awareness of the conflict’s humorous depiction being limited to, or at least dominated by, a single television series broadcast seventy years after the 1918 Armistice. The assessment that humour may have been a coping mechanism comes closer to current scholarly interpretations of humour’s role in the 1914–18 period. Although humorous representations of the war years are frequently overlooked in essays, monographs, and anthologies, valuable work has been produced demonstrating the ways in which jokes and comedy helped to maintain good morale. These studies, however, as with the more spontaneous responses above, do not take full account of the extent to which humour features in First World War literature, nor of the roles humour played in this body of writing. Recognising humour’s central part in creating often nuanced, complex representations of different types of conflict experience thus has the potential to make a substantial challenge to current understanding of the conflict’s depiction.

In this thesis I have addressed questions of representation and literary history that have previously been left unanswered, investigating how widely and in which genres humour appears, the functions humour serves when viewed as part of the literary portrayal of the conflict – as part of wartime literary culture – and the precedents that wartime humour had in pre-war writing. My research indicates that humorous literature about the conflict was fundamental to its representation. Across all genres, and in a large variety of texts, humour is used to communicate a range of war experiences in both military and non-combatant spheres, with humorous texts ranging widely in the heterogeneity of the pictures they create. Specific kinds of humour are often particularly suited to conveying certain components of and perspectives on the conflict. Kantian incongruities – anthropomorphism and dehumanisation, inversions of life and death – present pictures of the conflict that challenge readers’ understanding, creating the impression of the war zone as absurd, as a space that cannot be grasped rationally. Bergsonian contrasts between the organic and the mechanical help to convey experiences of individuals becoming part of the military machine, with machine-age humour reflecting the kind of ‘revenge’ on mechanisation that Benjamin describes, but ultimately contributing to impressions of soldiers stoically and patriotically accepting their roles. Humour that arises from military men laughing at past versions of themselves, as in Hobbes’ superiority theory, lies behind service authors’ comic personas – personas whose self-deprecation reflects Scruton’s framework in making them sympathetic in their greatness.

Freudian humour circumvents repression, facilitating portrayals of wartime subjects that might otherwise go unrepresented – the conflict’s effects on class relations, gender and sexual identities, and familial relationships – and inviting what Ngai calls minor feelings, rather than the kind of strong emotions that might lead to action and unrest.

Humour can appear momentarily in predominantly solemn texts, as well as in works that can more comfortably be labelled comic or comedies. It emerges in literature as diverse as the frequently anonymous poetry, stories, sketches, and parodies of trench newspapers, stories by service authors such as Johnston alongside those of the better-known Saki and Lewis, and plays by writers as dissimilar as Shaw, Jennings, and Collins. Perhaps surprisingly, humour does even appear in association with those aspects of warfare that have sometimes been thought of as armed conflict’s defining elements – the extreme phenomena of suffering and death that for some commentators make it a heightened or separate category of experience from the everyday.¹ Humorous texts describe the well-known ‘horrors’ of the war, but present these from perspectives that diverge from familiar emphases on suffering and disillusion. Indeed, in demonstrating something of the number and range of Great War texts in which humour is important and often fundamental, I have at times explored literary works that are not unambiguously or obviously humorous, approaching the edges of humour – the points at which it begins to tip into other modes. What this reveals are the intricacies that can be involved in humorous Great War texts, the multifaceted impressions of life during the war that they can present. Taken as a whole, humorous literature is a significant element of how the First World War was portrayed, constituting a mine of little-explored aspects of Great War representation. Far from being peripheral, or even novelty, examples of how the conflict was depicted, humorous texts give wide-ranging points of view on war experience, and are often as complex and evocative as more familiar renderings of the 1914–18 years.

I have also demonstrated how styles of humour established before the outbreak of war endured into the years of conflict. These types of humour were not only sufficiently robust to be adapted for the portrayal of war experience, but were often especially fitted to such depiction. Comic absurdity, machine-age comedy, insouciant ‘British’ humour, and the ambiguous, partially subversive, partially safe humour of the theatre all had roots in humorous literature and performance developed before the outbreak of the conflict. Comic absurdity in poetry, arising from Kantian incongruities, reflected techniques seen in nineteenth-century nonsense literature in particular. The comedy in trench newspapers, stemming from repetition and from contrasts between the human and the mechanical, developed before the war in music hall and popular periodicals, being part of the machine-age culture with which Bergson and Benjamin engaged. Patriotic, exclusive notions of ‘British’ humour are manifestations of the sense of community offered by laughter – senses identified as early as Hobbes’ superiority theory – but are especially noticeable in the first years of the twentieth century; these feed into the impressions of martial and national identity articulated in wartime stories. The Freudian humour

¹ Campbell, ‘Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism’, *New Literary History*, 30 (1999), 203–15 (p. 203); Winter, *War beyond Words*, p. 1.

popular in many examples of pre-war theatre was well suited to negotiating a balance between political and emotional safety and provocativeness – a balance that such humour continued to effect in wartime theatre. Uncovering the robustness of pre-war writing adds considerably to revisions of the fairly ingrained idea that the conflict was an event so extraordinary that it made necessary new forms of representation: most often this belief is expressed in reference to modernist art and to ironised versions of Georgian poetry.

This thesis has in a way conformed to the immensely influential view that the First World War should be seen as a grave matter, a matter for sober and earnest reflection, since my analysis draws attention to ways in which humorous representations of the conflict should be taken seriously. I have argued that humorous Great War literature has literary-historical importance and is worthy of detailed scholarly attention, that it often stands up to the scrutiny of close reading, and that it reveals thought-provoking responses to the war that have previously been overlooked. Ironically enough, though, what these grave claims imply is that the literature of the Great War should be (partly) dissociated from sobriety. In a sizeable, wide-ranging body of texts, the war is a phenomenon evoked through invitations to amusement, glee, delight, wit, merriment, and levity. It is portrayed using insouciance, sardonicism, whimsy, wryness, and drollery. These manifestations of humour do not necessarily replace such phenomena as grief, unease, and anxiety, but can sit alongside these painful feelings. The multiple humorous perspectives identified in this thesis, and the fact that humorous war writing was so central and so prominent while the fighting took place, trouble deep-seated beliefs surrounding the nature of the conflict and responses to it. Humorous First World War writing often still has the capacity to amuse and, by overturning prevalent understandings of the war years, it also has the power to provoke. There is room for this kind of disruption to how we think about the conflict and its literature.

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