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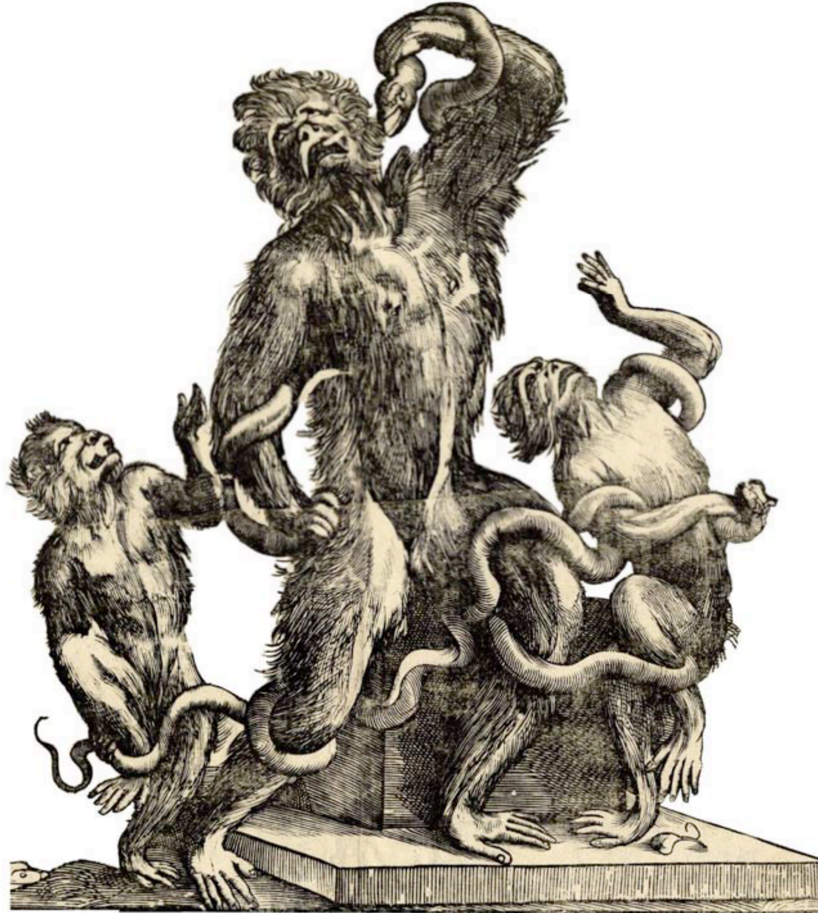

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MARIA GRAZIA DONGU

SHAKESPEAREAN FRAGMENTS TO DEFINE AND MOURN ENGLISHNESS IN "MRS DALLOWAY" AND "HER PRIVATES WE"

1. *Introduction*

In 2016, the celebrations of the quatercentenary of Shakespeare's death and the first of the Great War fell together. The coincidence favoured the flourishing of essays on the propaganda uses of his works, as well as on Shakespeare's cultural mobilisation on the part of Germany and France.[1] Historians turned their interest toward the war archives to trace the soldiers' reading habits in the trenches. Some of the volunteers and conscripts took copies of Shakespeare's works with them; others received theirs from the State. Lines from Shakespeare appear here and there in their

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[1] See M. C. Hendley, *Cultural Mobilization and British Responses to Cultural Transfer in Total War: The Shakespeare's Tercentenary of 1916*, in "First World War Studies", III, 1, 2012, pp. 25-49; M. Smialkowska, *Introduction: Mobilizing Shakespeare During the Great War*, in "Shakespeare", X, 3, 2014, pp. 225-229; T. Hoenselaars, *Great War Shakespeare: Somewhere in France, 1914-1919*, in "Société Française Shakespeare", XXXIII, 2015, https://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/2960.

letters to comment on the present days and pit the soldiers' experience against that of fictional characters, assumed as the best representatives of England's virtues by the political and military authorities and their marshalling propaganda.[2] Shakespeare was the most potent literary voice of England, speaking directly to his fellow citizens and the world through his characters.

It is then no surprise that Shakespeare is one of the protagonists of the two novels analysed here. *Her Privates We* (1930) by Frederic Manning, first published under the title *Middle Parts of Fortune* in 1929,[3] opens each of its chapters with epigraphs from Shakespeare's plays. Through the juxtaposition of Shakespeare's lines and Manning's narrative, a dialogue takes place between the poet and British soldiers, past and present. *Mrs Dalloway* exploits the identification between Shakespeare and his works more explicitly when the playwright becomes Septimus' interlocutor. Casual Shakespearean quotations[4] are borrowed to express nationalistic feelings or ambiguous messages offered to characters and readers.

In both novels, the readers must play an active part, comparing the original and the new situational context in which the lines occur. Friction between the texts helps the readers discover the ideologies that underlie a collective history of England, where different discourses on Englishness

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[2] See E. G. C. King, *'A Priceless Book to Have out Here': Soldiers Reading Shakespeare in the First World War*, in "Shakespeare", X, 3, 2014, pp. 230-244; M. Helmers, *Out of the Trenches: The Rhetoric of the Letters from the Western Front*, in *Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory*, edited by C. Declercq and J. Walker, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 54-72.

[3] See F. Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortunes*, London, Peter Davies, 1929. The same publisher issued the expurgated version of *Her Privates We* in 1930. Excerpts are from the Kindle book *Her Privates We*, issued by Reinkarnation in 2014, which contains the title page of the first edition.

[4] Casual quotations are "simply verbal traces", which do not acknowledge any source. See R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, Oxford, Routledge, 2018, Kindle book, location 140.

coexist. Such a biography is split into as many fragments as the forces struggling to hegemonise the country, Europe and the world. Calvo's analysis of posters and books celebrating Shakespeare and the British Great War's heroes helps us identify words that disseminated the idea of an idealised Britannia, which stood for virtue, courage and comradeship.[5] Poems from the anti-war poets perform the deconstruction of this flattering portrayal, showing how the epochal event triggered meditation on the actual motivations leading to the massacre. These poems will be quoted to clarify the strategies enacted by the novelists, in order to reconstruct a collective rendition of the nightmare of war.

Intertextuality favours the juxtaposition of discourses, which coexist in the space of the pages as they coexisted in early twentieth-century culture. Joseph Frank defined modernist works 'spatial', insofar as they present us with a mythical simultaneity of events, meeting the disapproval of those who objected to his use of the term as metaphorical.[6] My use of the word is literal, as I refer to the arrangement of fragments on the same page, conveying the chaos of ever-changing culture more than envisaging anti-temporal reconstructions of reality. The intertextual combination of words and texts is a key feature in many modernist novels, and such is the incomplete work of Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*, as I will show.

As Italo Calvino demonstrated, taking the cue from structuralist theories, literature results from combining narrative units borrowed from

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[5] See C. Calvo, *Fighting over Shakespeare: Commemorating the 1916 Tercentenary in Wartime*, in "Critical Survey", XXIV, 2012, pp. 48-72; Ead., *Shakespeare in Khaki*, in *English and American Studies in Spain: New Developments and Trends*, edited by A. L. Lafuente and M. D. Porto Requejo, Alcalá, Universidad de Alcalá, 2015, pp. 12-30. See also: T. Hoenselaars, *Shakespeare, Shipwrecks and the Great War: Shakespeare's Reception in Wartime and Post-War Britain*, in "Shakespeare", X, 2014, pp. 245-260.

[6] See J. Frank, *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1963.

other stories.[7] The arrangement of these units is always provisional, unstable, and, if subverted, will tell another tale. Woolf shows us how a reader-writer dismantles a text, be it Shakespeare or life, and then tries to assemble it again. In line with Septimus' method, Manning uses epigraphs from Shakespeare, which are rephrased throughout his novel. The final output is an elegy for the nation that ruled the world but discovered the flaws of imperial England.

2. *Shakespeare as the catalyser of meditation on Englishness in "Mrs Dalloway"*

The war was a defining moment in the lives of soldiers and private citizens, as the memorialisation effort in the post-war years attests. Like Othello in Shakespeare's tragedy (*Othello*, V, 2, 349-365), individuals involved in the collective drama wanted to convey their story in their own words. Woolf complies with the urge, on the part of the characters, to self-express in order to make the past bearable, representing the divide in the nation's life through her characters. As she declares in her preface to the New York edition of *Mrs Dalloway*, she initially planned to have only one protagonist, Clarissa.[8] Then she decided to create Clarissa's double, Septimus. Thus, she dramatised the polarity between the perception that civilians and soldiers had of the devastation of the war. Both were tormented by memories of it and sought to repress recollections of cruel events. Their tales are composed of contradictory fragments, permeated by the striving for the meaning of their own lives, histories and country.

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[7] See I. Calvino, *Cibernetica e fantasmi* (*Appunti sulla narrativa come processo combinatorio)*, in *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società*, Torino, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 164-181.

[8] See V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, New York, The Modern Library, 1922 [*sic*], p. vi.

Woolf conflated Brooke's truncated life and Sassoon's revolt against the establishment in her biographical sketch of Septimus. Echoing the ideal Rupert Brooke that was painted in public eulogies following the poet's death,[9] Septimus had enlisted to shelter his country and the people he cared for, such as Miss Pole, the teacher who had made him love Shakespeare. He could not distinguish between the conflicting views urging him to volunteer. On the one side, poetry, beauty, and idealised love; on the other, his boss Mr Brewer's ideology, duties, masculine virtues and strength. In truth, since the quotations from Shakespeare's plays are decontextualised, they reinforce both visions of the world and of the young men's place in it: during the war years, it was clear that they were mental constructs at odds with each other. Septimus would have liked to be a new Keats, improving himself by reading and writing. When he volunteered, he became a man, the one Mr Brewer wished for, and undertook a successful military career by reining in his extreme sensitivity and becoming tough, as an Englishman should.[10]

The clash between these two 'Englishnesses' becomes evident when other characters brutally silence Shakespeare. Mr Dalloway, Dr Holmes, and Lady Bruton purposely avoid reading his works. Mr Dalloway is embarrassed by the exposure of his private affairs and emotions;[11] Dr Holmes thinks that poetry leads to mentally damaging introspection.[12] Lady Bruton emerges as the most vigorous representative of the brave Shakespearean heroes exploited by war propaganda. Although she proudly affirms she is not a reader of Shakespeare, she is at one with the aggressive, imperialistic Englishness attributed to him because of her family history,

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[9] See V. Woolf, *The New Crusade*, and *Rupert Brooke*, in "Times Literary Supplement", 27 December 1917 and 8 August 1918.

[10] V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., pp. 129-130.

[11] See *ibid.*, p. 113.

[12] See *ibid.*, p. 138.

jealously preserved in her memory and revived in her dreams. There is a casual quotation in the narrator's rendering of her mental attitude that must not pass unnoticed, "For she never spoke of England, but this isle of men, this dear, dear land, was in her blood (without reading Shakespeare), and if ever a woman could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes […] that woman was Millicent Bruton".[13] The half-line embedded in the passage ("this dear dear land") is part of John of Gaunt's dying speech (*Richard II*, II, 1, 57). Decontextualised, it celebrates a glorious vanquisher England, which Lady Bruton believes will last forever. In the full text, John of Gaunt contrasts it with the shameful England of his times, defeated, deprived of its lands and nursing internecine conflicts: "That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (II, 1, 65-66). The eulogy of England turns into an elegy, mourning the past. This meaning reverberates back to Lady Bruton's musings, telling the reader how blind she is to the present.

In Brooke's *The Soldier*, the soldier's death does not mean England's defeat but symbolises colonisation as it expands the English cultural matrix: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England. There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed".[14] Personal annihilation becomes the paradoxical survival of the nation. On his part, Gaunt does not envisage the glory of a staying power, but self-destruction, aggression turned against itself. But in *Mrs Dalloway* the narrator uses a partial quote from Gaunt's speech, one closer to Lady Bruton's gut emotions. In so doing, she silences Gaunt's criticism of England's present. Shakespearean works had been used in

[13] *Ibid*., p. 274.

[14] R. Brooke, *1914 and Other Poems*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1915, p. 15, ll. 1-4.

anthologies to predict the future and gloss the war reports.[15] As Woolf suggests, they could not do that if mutilated.

3. *Art and deceit of the fragment in "Mrs Dalloway"*

In her article *Rupert Brooke*, Woolf notes how incomplete the poet's life was.[16] In *Mrs Dalloway*, she allows him double sufficient time to change his view about the war. Like Siegfried Sassoon, Septimus perceives the perversion of the rhetoric of war. A poet, a survivor, worn out by a sense of guilt and by his nation's responsibility in the slaughter, Septimus shares Sassoon's disillusionment when back home. He rereads Shakespeare's plays and other writers he used to love, but they lead him to a bleak vision of the world: "That boy's business of the intoxication of language – Antony and Cleopatra – had shrivelled utterly […]. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair".[17] In other words, Septimus grasps the message hidden under a flourishing style. In light of Woolf's essays on reading, it can be stated that Septimus reacts to the plays differently because of his devastating war experiences. He asks new questions of the texts and gets new answers.[18]

In a passage from *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1925), Woolf hints at past readers who will always influence present readings of a text. To define those readers, she uses the term 'ghosts',[19] which might

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[15] See C. Calvo, *Fighting Over Shakespeare: Commemorating the 1916 Tercentenary in Wartime*, cit., p. 62.

[16] See V. Woolf, *Rupert Brooke*, cit.

[17] V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., pp. 133-134.

[18] See K. Flint, *Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading*, in "The Yearbook of English Studies", XXVI, 1996, pp. 187-198.

[19] V. Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 5: 1929-1932*, edited by S. N. Clarke, London, Random House, Kindle version, location 6052.

apply both to Shakespearean scholars, expert readers who have constructed him as the patriot-Bard, and to Shakespeare himself, the shadow who looks on English history.[20] In *Mrs Dalloway*, the intertextual dialogue between reader and text is enacted by a distressed man, Septimus, who first plays the eulogist and then the accuser of his nation. His new readings of Shakespeare's works unveil the national biography as unstable, bound to be incessantly rewritten.

In the end, Septimus deconstructs the war rhetoric, discovering the real message behind the propaganda superimposed upon Shakespeare's plays.[21] As a writer, he produces fragmentary, apparently unrelated texts, and already deconstructed:

> "The table drawer was full of those writings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death."[22]
>
> "Now for his writings; how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans – his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world. Burn them! he cried."[23]

In the first excerpt, Septimus' writings are jumbled in his table drawer, contiguous in space but thematically distant. The random list of contents further emphasises the fragmentariness and heterogeneity of the veteran's works. In his youth, art had been complete in its form and beauty

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[20] See K. Flint, *Reading Uncommonly*, cit., p. 189.

[21] A cultural text spatialises culture: see J. M. Lotman, *The Place of Art: among other Modelling Systems*, in "Sign Systems Studies", XXXIX, 2011 [1967], pp. 251-270. A literary text can, however, put together diverse perspectives by using polysemantic words and inserting ambiguous quotations. It is also open to various interpretations. J. Lotman, *Different Cultures, Different Codes*, in "Times Literary Supplement", 12 October 1973, pp. 1213-1215.

[22] V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, cit., p. 221.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 224.

(he composed poems, he might have written "a masterpiece").[24] It is now a juxtaposition of incomplete sentences and dialogues, which somehow promise to find their meaning by accumulation. Septimus' drawer reproduces an intertextual game, which writer and readers can decipher/play. It is also an example of *ars combinatoria*.

Septimus develops into a modernist writer by way of the nightmare of the war, alienation, and a frantic search for the meaning of all things. Fragmentary writing proves the most effective way to express the contradictions of the conflict, as it removes words from any given ideological frame and unveils their arbitrariness. More remarkably, Septimus' topics are defined by their elegiac mode, such as the celebration of the dead, the conversation with the dead, the hope in the afterlife, and reconciliation. The speech acts used are appeals to the political authorities, urging them to stop destroying life. Fragmentary writing, which is always in the process of becoming something else, seems the most appropriate tool to celebrate the separation and discontinuity of the past, and to prepare for the future.

Septimus lives between death and life, close to his ghosts, Shakespeare included. He is willing to listen to them and transfer their message to his contemporaries, even when he plans suicide. Septimus performs the dismemberment of his body as a piece of art. Indeed, he conceives it as a tragedy,[25] a message initially aimed at Dr Holmes but that will find its way into the hearts of sensitive people. His mangled body reminds readers of the corpses on the battlefields and the lost unity of a cultural matrix, precisely like his disordered table. Fragments are the most appropriate way to sing an elegy for a lost world, clearing room for the

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[24] *Ibid*., pp. 128-129.
[25] See *ibid*., p. 235.

new. Abruptly interrupted sentences and decontextualised quotations, reproduce an in-between space that is neither past nor future, a broken matrix waiting for restoration.[26]

4. *"Her Privates We": Fragmenta Shakespeareana in a linguistic pot*

Her Privates We is a mosaic of both marginalised and hegemonic fragments of the post-war revision of Englishness. In tune with this trait, Manning did not claim his authorship on the 1929 cover page, figuring as Private 19022, his military registration number. Bourne, the main character, is a fictionalised Manning who deliberately decides to merge his voice into a chorus of sounds and words from every region of Great Britain. Manning, known as an old-fashioned aesthete, reproduces here the crude language of the trenches, strikingly different from the poised, solemn turns of phrase of the poems, speeches, and posters that urged British men to fight for their country. However, it would be wrong to expect him to make a harsh critique of the war. In his novel, the celebration of the war mingles with the denunciation of the propaganda lies, juxtaposing pro-war and anti-war sentiments.

Writing almost ten years after the truce and in the third person, Manning tried to distance himself from his memories. However, a dominant consciousness, embodied by Bourne, pervades the text. Like Manning, Bourne is well educated, reserved, canny, sometimes fatalistic, and alienated from the British privates and officials. He dies in the last pages, adding mourning to mourning, depriving the reader of his sceptical guidance, and giving the veteran Manning what he could not have on the

[26] See G. L. Bruns, *Interruptions. The Fragmentary Aesthetic in Modern Literature*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2018, p. 15.

battlefield – control over his fate. Death, its ineluctability and its unpredictability are recurrent topics in the novel.[27]

Manning's effort to detach himself from the tragedy of the war is also evident in his 1929 preface, in which he recognised his authorship, signing with his full name, and outlined his strategies to control and set free his memories. These strategies combine reality and fiction, which gives his readers an authentic description of events enacted by fictitious characters. However, Manning writes that he had heard the characters' voices in the camp, and that they still resound in his mind. Possible consequences of the experienced trauma, these ghostly voices provide us with a key to the novel. Indeed, *Her Privates We* is a recording of the words heard daily in the camp and on the battlefield, mingling actual speeches with sentences from the letters received by the soldiers and conversations with French civilians. In his attempt to reproduce these voices, Manning creates an amalgam of the diverse regional and social varieties of English, along with inserts of Latin, French, and Shakespearean quotations. The interplay of languages highlights one of the most familiar topics discussed in the Great War narratives, the intense conflict between recruits and officers.[28] They do not even speak the same language. It is also a powerful description of England, not as a gorgeous poster-Goddess, but as a hodge-podge of diverse cultures. Like Shakespeare, Manning writes a linguistic chorography of England.

Throughout the novel, soldiers send letters to their relatives, informing them about their health and daily routines or comforting widows and bereaved mothers. They also receive letters and read them cursorily

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[27] "The problem which confronted them all equally, though some were unable or unwilling to define it, did not concern death so much as the affirmation of their own will in the face of death": See F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 184.

[28] See R. Hampson, *"Excursion into a foreign tongue": Frederic Manning and Ford Madox Ford*, in *Languages and the First World War*, cit., p. 129.

and privately, trying to control their emotions. Their families' letters detail the community they have left behind. Thus, rarely inserted but alluded to, letters are bridges between the two pieces of their broken lives. As part of the intertextual game, the narrator's tale absorbs these texts so that their style and words contaminate the narrative, making the voices of the civilians heard in the text. Those of the soldiers harmonise or bitterly clash with them. Intertextuality serves a reassuring function, as anything that reminds troops in the trenches of familiar habits[29] suggests a well-known and predictable story. Juxtaposed to it, however, are fragments of diverse discourses on war, which attribute new meanings to the present experience.

Manning does not attribute quotations from the plays to his characters but to Shakespeare himself. In the novel, he appears as one of the shadows (soldiers are appropriately defined as such) emerging from the darkness, ordering, bitterly meditating on or cursing their destiny. Indeed, Shakespeare plays a leading role among the authors of the past. His lines are prefixed to every chapter; besides, the enigmatic titles of both the original and the expurgated editions are fragments from *Hamlet*, II, 2: respectively, *The Middle Fortune* and *Her Privates We*. The first edition matches the title with a more extended excerpt from the same play, act and scene, while the second adds a few of Falstaff's lines from *1 Henry IV*, V, 3 as epigraphs to the entire novel. The two titles captivate the readers and immediately engage them in a search for meaning. 'Privates' alludes to the novel's protagonist, Bourne, who dislikes promotion to higher ranks. The perspective chosen is easily detectable from the start, and it becomes transparent if the reader contextualises the fragment from Shakespeare. In *Hamlet* II, 2, vv. 230-238, Hamlet meets his false friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. When Guildenstern says they are not at the top of their

[29] See M. Helmers, *Out of the Trenches*, cit., p. 70.

Fortune, Hamlet playfully locates them "in the middle part" of the ancient Goddess. Guildenstern resolves the ambiguity by explaining that they are 'privates', soldiers of the lower ranks, but, insisting on the pun on 'privates' as one's genitals, Hamlet concludes that they must certainly be in "the secret parts of Fortune" because she is a strumpet.

In the first edition of the novel, the epigraph completes the enigmatic title: "'On fortune's cap we are not the very button' [...] 'Then you live about her waist, or in the middle of her favour?' [...] 'Faith, her privates we'" (II, 2, 231-236). On the contrary, a different excerpt from *1 Henry IV*, V, 3, 35-38 serves as an epigraph to *Her Privates We:* "I have led my ragamuffins where they are peppered; there's not three of my hundred and fifty left alive, and they are for the town's end, to beg during life". Falstaff's lines are a bitter denunciation of the fate of the soldiers (they have been led to die) and the veterans (they have become beggars).

In *Middle Fortune*, the author chose part of the epigraph as his title. In *Her Privates We*, he combines two Shakespearean fragments taken from different plays to serve the same function of orienting the reader. In other words, he splits up Shakespeare's works, giving voice to the working classes. In doing so, Manning defines his perspective on the Great War, which reverberates back to the past. Like Septimus, he has understood what Shakespeare has told him, an old story of men deprived of their will and acted on by some abstract and faceless agency, call it Fortune or blind army authorities. The quotation from *Hamlet*, II, 2 is recomposed in chapter 18, prefixed by: "Fortune? O, most true; she is a strumpet". By putting together these disordered fragments, the reader reconstructs a scattered narration. It happens appropriately in the last chapter when Bourne dies without

obtaining his promised promotion, fortune denying him the full prize of military honours.[30]

The partial restoration of the broken quotation is significant. It voices the search for meaning in a dismembered civilisation or the latent homology between Bourne and Hamlet. In Calvo's words, "*Hamlet* is an intertext throughout the novel, as it is present in the title and in the family resemblance between the prince of Denmark and Bourne, the main character".[31] The suggested link between the sceptical crown prince, who renounces being king,[32] and the private, who desires promotion but avoids it, challenges the identification of the hesitant Hamlet with Wilhelm II in British and French propaganda.[33] In my view, Bourne, an Australian soldier who fights for Britain, shares a mind wandering on the edge of an existential abyss with the German Emperor. The war rhetoric linked Hamlet to diverse nationalities, its target being the irresoluteness of the rulers. In the post-war years, Hamlet became the representative of those European intellectuals who meditated on the eternal dichotomy between lies and truths. Like Hamlet in Paul Valéry's *Crisis of the European Mind*,[34] Bourne is an intellectual constantly on the verge of acting but mostly brooding over life and death.

The fragmentariness of Manning's report reproduces the alternation of action and apathy. The excerpt below significantly indicates the

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[30] C. Calvo, *Shakespeare in Khaki*, cit., p. 23, observes that Fortune controls the three main characters' lives.

[31] *Ibid*., p. 24.

[32] I refer to the progressive *kenosis*, self-emptying of Hamlet throughout the play, the renunciation of his royal status and his rational power. See E. P. Levy, Hamlet *and the Rethinking of Man*, Cranbury, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008, pp. 187-192.

[33] See T. Hoenselaars, *Great War Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 8-10.

[34] See P. Valéry, *Letters from France, I: The Spiritual Crisis*, in "The Athenaeum", 1919, pp. 365-368.

infectious power of excitement, which urges the soldiers to shape their experiences into heroic tragedies or metaphysical struggles:

> "In the last couple of days their whole psychological condition had changed: they had behind them no longer the moral impetus which thrust them into action, which carried them forward on a wave of emotional excitement, transfiguring all the circumstances of their life so that these could only be expressed in the terms of heroic tragedy, of some superhuman or even divine conflict with the powers of evil; all that tempest of excitement was spent, and they were now mere derelicts in a wrecked and dilapidated world."[35]

Multiple perspectives, intertextuality, and the swing from euphoria to dysphoria give this war novel a peculiar inconsistency, expressed by utilising a disrupted dictionary, uncertain about the stable referents of the lemmas. In the flow of words, the narrator does not even try to order diverse discourses about the war, which is either a sinful butcher of youth or what makes them men. The narrator often uses 'action' to define a military attack, and it seems that a man realises his potential through action. However, he also defines the soldiers' movements and answers as mechanical, as if a faceless agency acted on them. Mechanical acting deprives the war of its moral purpose and goal. Two diverse discourses on war clash. The narrator attributes them to different ranks: "When one was in the ranks, one lived in a world of men, full of flexible movement and human interest: when one became an officer, one became part of an inflexible and inhuman machine".[36] The narrator does not select and adjust events into a heroic tragedy. The other epigraphs from Shakespeare are consistently lines uttered by the lower ranks, the main protagonists of comedy. Through the lens of the minor characters, the narrator tests the

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[35] F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 39.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 92.

rhetoric of war, offering new and conflicting perspectives,[37] precisely like the Bard of his epigraphs.

The epigraphs are taken from a small Shakespearean corpus: besides *Hamlet*, *1* and *2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like it*, *Julius Caesar.* The most quoted ones are *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, representing a mischievous and rebellious hero who has turned into his country's defender. Prince Hal offers another key character to the reader, as by turns he coincides with and diverges from the reluctant and critical Bourne. Indeed, the narrator demonstrates that Shakespeare speaks to the soldiers and on their behalf because he provides them with nuanced feelings and situations, which can match every moment in the chaotic experience of war. Based on the occasion and their diverse ranks in the army, Shakespeare is summoned to express the soldiers' thoughts and their changing attitudes towards the war.

Manning has taken more than one epigraph from *Henry V*, IV, 1. In so doing, he has reconstructed the verbal exchange between characters from the lower ranks, almost respecting the sequence of lines but cutting off the King's commentaries:

> "FLUELLEN So! In the name of Jesu Christ, speak fewer. It is the greatest admiration in the universal world, when the true and ancient prerogatifs and laws of the wars is not kept. If you would take the pains but to examine the wars of Pompey the Great, you shall find, I warrant you, that there is no tiddle-taddle nor pibble-babble in Pompey's camp. I warrant you, you shall find the ceremonies of the wars, and the cares of it, and the forms of it, and the sobriety of it, and the modesty of it, to be otherwise." (IV, 1, 66-75; epigraph to chapter 6).

> "BATES He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck. And so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here." (IV, 1, 113-116; epigraph to chapter 15).

[37] See C. Calvo, *Shakespeare in Khaki*, cit., p. 24.

"WILLIAMS We see yonder the beginning of day, but I think we shall never see the end of it […] I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle." (IV,1, 89-90, 140-141; epigraph to chapter 16).

This scene opens with Henry's address to his nobles, triggering their virtue and courage by praising their fortitude in the present misery. After dispatching his princely companions, who must inform and hearten their peers, he begs to be left to his thoughts. Then, he meets the characters quoted above, but without unveiling his identity. Close to them, as he has been to Falstaff in his youth, the king apprehends what the privates think of the war and his role, counteracting their lines with his commentaries, agreeing with them or offering a new perspective. The point at issue in the lines quoted is whether the chivalric code is still applicable to this war or not. Fluellen extolls the Roman heroes' poise in every moment of the war, while Bates doubts the king's courage. Williams broods over their impending death, bound as they are to die in the battle. The perspective of the lower ranks on the war reverberates backwards on Shakespeare's *Henry V* and forward on the body of Manning's chapters, enlivening the debate about the just war.

John S. Mebane states that Shakespeare's *Henry V* distinguishes between the myth of warfare, which ennobles men, and the definition of war as always impious. Counteracting previous readings of the history play, he asserts that "If we read *Henry V* [...] as a reflection of cultural conflicts, we fail to appreciate Shakespeare's artistic deflation of the rationalisations for warfare that [...] have masked the self-interest of those whose purpose in going to war is to maintain their own power and prestige".[38] Showing again mastery of the *ars combinatoria*, Manning singles out and enhances the ironic deconstruction of the myth of ennobling

[38] J. S. Mebane, *"Impious War": Religion and the Ideology of Warfare in* Henry V, in "Studies in Philology", CIV, 2007, p. 266.

competition between individuals and countries. However, as the next section will demonstrate, the long debate has not ended, since conflict is still considered a stimulus to inward improvement.

5. *Renaming war: Shakespeare's words and a soldier's memories*

In his 1929 preface to his novel, Manning puts forward his thoughts about war, "a crime but also a punishment", whose definition raises moral issues and implies the renaming of the main actors in it, "men, not [...] beasts or gods". Notwithstanding the fact that the "present age is disinclined" to ponder on this "moral question",[39] he will do so throughout *Her Privates We.* The interplay of Shakespearean quotations, the situation in which they have been uttered, narrative echoes, and metatextual commentaries will help the reader to historicise diverse definitions of war.

Two passages in *Her Privates We* alert the reader and orient his/her interpretation of the mix of epigraphs and body of the chapters. When commenting on eavesdropped words, the narrator says that "[t]o overhear one-half of a conversation is always a little mystifying".[40] A few pages earlier, he had meditated on how the war was testing slogans, stereotyped sentences, and, I add, Shakespeare's mutilated quotations:

> "War, which tested and had wrecked already so many conventions, tested not so much the general truth of a proposition, as its truth in relation to each and every individual case; and Bourne thought of many men, even men of rank, with military antecedents, whose honour, as the war increased its scope, had become a fugitive and cloistered virtue, though it would probably renew its lustre again in more costermonger times."[41]

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[39] F. Manning, "Prefatory Notes" to *Her Privates We*, cit.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Shakespeare's (and, in this case, also Milton's) fragments are puzzling and find their meanings in the new context, keeping their semantic aura[42] for the alert reader. The process enacted through the novel tests the sense of propaganda words and Shakespeare's demystifying lines in diverse situations and for each individual. In doing so, the narrative doubles what war has done, denouncing the divorce between coded words (honour, courage, and comradeship) and actions, multiplying the range of referents and phrases that have connoted this human activity. The clash between the Shakespearean and the new collocation of these words reveals that the aim of deconstructing ideologies superimposed on human experiences underlies Manning's work.

Chapter 2 opens with a quotation from *Henry V*, a play much pillaged by patriotic and nationalistic writings in the years leading up to and during the war. In act IV, scene 6, the king surveys his army, counting and mourning the losses in battle. Exeter sums up York's dying speech, proclaiming his love and loyalty to the king. Before dying, York had kissed his dead friend Suffolk. Remembering this poignant moment, Exeter says: "But I had not so much of man in me / And all my mother came into mine eyes / And gave me up to tears" (IV, 6, 30-32). *Henry V* shows the rise of a new king, who must act while the chivalric code is still alive. The aristocratic figures involved in the exchange refer to loyalty, friendship, heroic death, and Exeter weeps, moved by their manifestation of such values. The propaganda summed up the portrait of the ideal soldier in these keywords; only one element is at odds with it because the English warrior

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[42] I am slightly adapting the general definition of 'semantic aura' which describes the recurrence of words or strings of words in given texts with bad, good or neutral connotation. B. Louw, *Irony in the Text or Insincerity in the Writer? The Diagnostic Potential of Semantic Prosodies*, in *Text and Technology: In Honour of John Sinclair*, edited by M. Baker, G. Francis and T. Tognini-Bonelli, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1993, pp. 157-176.

should stand poised.[43] In a binary system of meanings, women are sensitive, men unemotional. In the first decades of the twentieth century, this system governed not only the propaganda messages but also literature, where characters enlist to prove their manliness.[44] However, Manning chooses only the above mentioned, poignant lines and cuts off the entire exchange, which emerges here and there in the chapter. In doing so, he purposely highlights qualities that soldiers were trained to repress. I do not maintain that he contrasts the old with a new masculine martial model, but that he acknowledges that a man can be bold or sympathetic on different occasions.

Like the scene in Shakespeare, chapter 2 describes what happens in the camp when the battle is over. Unlike the Shakespearean fragment, it focuses mainly on caring for others, the comradeship celebrated by martial authorities. It is a moderate version of love, which allows the army to achieve its goals and comes from "a tacit understanding between" the soldiers.[45] The most poignant feelings are kept in check. Consistently with the British warrior's ideal portrayal, these men have seen death and have survived, passing from enthusiasm and excitement to danger and apathy, easily mistaken for the celebrated English self-control.[46] It is left to Pritchard, a member of the lower ranks, to express his sorrow for his chum's death, especially for the words he could not say to him. Every sentence he uttered was inadequate to comfort his friend in his last moments, and equally ineffective are the comments used by his comrades

[43] "The definitions of heroism as efficiency, coolness and cheerfulness would be echoed in ex-servicemen's postwar constructions of themselves as heroes". J. Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 89.

[44] See K. J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity. War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 41.

[45] See F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., p. 12.

[46] See *ibid*., p. 13.

to soothe his distress. The uneasiness of both officers and soldiers with Pritchard's outpouring of emotions is symptomatic of the inability to cope with the survivor's PTSD. Replying to Corporal Tozer's sympathetic words, Pritchard uses the rhetoric of war, mentioning the values of comradeship, but defies the worthiness of war itself if life is only senseless slaughter. Dissolution is preferable for him[47] as it was for Woolf's Septimus.

We can perceive the limitation of early twentieth-century culture in the conflict between a scene in Shakespeare, which could have been taken from a chivalric romance, and this passage, whose main protagonist is a private. Indeed, the army authorities tried to superimpose a grid of behaviours, ignoring any inconsistency. However, Shakespeare gives Manning a more nuanced colour palette to describe war: action and rest, alertness and boredom, enjoyable adventure and nostalgia for familiar places. As Manning's narrator says in a previously quoted passage, soldiers shape their lives into heroic tragedies when they believe in a metaphysical conflict between good and evil, but then they find themselves deluded in their hopes and convictions. In the space between two battles, they are the pale shadow of the heroes they play-acted. The Shakespeare epigraph in chapter 4 hints at this: "And now their pride and mettle is asleep" (*1 Henry IV*, IV, 3, 24).

Comradeship, heroism, and honour overlap in the soldiers' letters and diaries from the front, as if these young men were discovering that experience sharpens their vocabulary. Manning, for instance, rereads heroism in light of a new definition of comradeship: "At one moment a particular man may be nothing at all to you, and the next minute you will go through hell for him. No, it is not friendship. The man doesn't matter so

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[47] See *ibid.*, p. 15.

much, it's a kind of impersonal emotion, a kind of enthusiasm, in the old sense of the word".[48] Later, he describes this "kind of enthusiasm, quiet and restrained because aware of all it hazarded";[49] however, enthusiasm is contagious and makes a whole of single individualities. Etymologically the term 'enthusiasm' reminds us of religious discourse, in its meaning of "inspiration, frenzy, to be inspired by God", not of the war propaganda ideals of service and patriotic defence.[50] In *Her Privates We*, there is no symbolic exaggeration of a military virtue in the meaning attached to comradeship, which is close to its exact opposite, solitude: "self-reliance lies at the very heart of comradeship. In so far as Mr Rhys had something of the same character, they respected him; but when he spoke to them of patriotism, sacrifice, and duty, he merely clouded and confused their vision".[51]

All in all, epigraphs and chapters convey an awareness of the decay of the chivalric code of war. A case in point is Fluellen's already cited lines prefixed to chapter 6, which praise the solemnity of Roman soldiers in speech and tone of voice, as opposed to the present coarse language in the British camps. The epigraph to chapter 3, from *Othello* (II, 3), refers to drinking, a vice which is said to be proper of English soldiers, and in Shakespeare's tragedy marks the dishonour of Cassio, who embodies a dying chivalric model. Significantly, Bourne's comrades feel that "duty and honour were merely the pretexts on which they were being deprived of their most elementary rights".[52] Moreover, the epigraph to chapter 8,

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[48] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[50] See T. Kühne, *Comradeship*, in *Brill's Digital Library of World War I*, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2352-3786_dlws1_beww1_en_0135.
[51] F. Manning, *Her Privates We*, cit., pp. 149-150.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

"Ambition, the soldier's virtue" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III, 1, 22-24) exposes Bourne to the officers' envy.

To insert an instance from an anti-war poet, the same dissatisfaction with the chivalric rendition of war appears in Sassoon's *Glory of Women*.[53] In the first part of the poem, women, confined to their homes, shape men into heroes, and their retreat, murders and death on the battlefields into chivalric romances. Their vision collides with the accurate report offered by the poet and offsets the epigraph from *2 Henry IV* (III, 2, 232-236) prefixed to chapter 1 of Manning's novel: "By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once. We owe God a death [...] And let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next". This fatalistic acceptance of human fate corresponded to the soldiers' feelings much more than their wish to die for their country. British soldiers and officers used these lines to comfort themselves and the allies, as Manning's translation of them into contemporary English testifies to: "we'll keep moving out of one bloody misery into another, until we break, see, until we break".[54]

A mythical idea of England endures, however, in the soldiers' memories. The narrator poignantly describes some of them evading the thought of nine of their group sacrificed by the higher ranks: "We sit here and think of England, as a lot of men might sit and think of their childhood. It is all past and irrecoverable, but we sit and think of it to forget the present".[55] The myth of a happy England is reassuring, as it was for Lady Bruton and Rupert Brooke. Here it soothes the soldiers' grief. However, there is a breach that cannot be mended between past and present. Their trust in the military authorities has gone. The myth is irretrievable. Comradeship was never there, nor glory, nor chivalric romance.

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[53] See S. Sassoon, *The War Poems*, New York, Dover, 2004, p. 65.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

6. *Conclusions*

Looking at the interplay of Shakespeare's lines in two twentieth-century novels as *ars combinatoria* has allowed us to unveil the uses of intertextuality to explore and deconstruct the fabricated national biography of England, made up of the forged lives of heroes. Taking Shakespeare's plays as foundational texts, Woolf reveals to us how they can be exploited to promote an arrogant policy under the guise of nationalistic values by decontextualising them, cutting them into pieces. In her novel, she also has a reader, Septimus, who can discover this use of Shakespeare by highlighting the many hidden meanings in his plays, which result from the combination of conflicting discourses. Septimus' readings inspire a mosaic of fragmentary writing, in which sentences have been juxtaposed at random. A chaotic work that lacks any orderly arrangement of words and paragraphs has the effect of reproducing the process of deconstruction of familiar texts. It is left to the readers to find their meaning in it, as they move from fragment to fragment.

Her Privates We pursues the same goal through the dismemberment of Shakespeare's plays, whose excerpts are prefixed to each chapter. The epigraphs interact with the text, shedding light on characters fighting in France. The mere juxtaposition of quotations from Shakespeare's plays with Manning's war descriptions helps to articulate the message put forward by privates and repressed by propaganda. Breaking the plays into pieces and recording their echoes in the routine of the trenches provide multiple plots of the war enterprise, the heroic and the comic. There are at least two ways in which the national adventure in the Great War can be represented. When the reader puts together the series of epigraphs, he/she understands that the quotations from Shakespeare mainly counterpoint the pomposity of British self-representation, whether they sing poignant

elegies, mourning the death of the dream-like chivalric world, or highlight the stoic acceptance of a hapless fate by the lower ranks, stubbornly unreceptive to war propaganda.

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