‘War is the natural occupation of man’, declared Winston Churchill looking back on nearly half a century of perpetual warfare. A product of the British public school system, himself imbued with late Victorian ideals of ‘manliness’, for Churchill masculinity was exemplified by virility, aggression, and endurance. A real man had no feeble moral objections to killing his fellow man.\(^1\) Within such a definition of manliness, the masculinity of any individual who questioned the morality of war, or refused to fight was deeply problematic.\(^2\) Yet what constitutes normative masculinity at any one time is never uncontested. There are always alternative available possibilities for male self-expression and identity.\(^3\) Exploring the relationship between subjectivity and discourse, this study aims to examine the contested and often problematic masculinities of the war poet Wilfred Owen, who as not only a critic of the First World War but also as a poet and a homosexual, situated his own masculinity largely in opposition to hegemonic modes of masculine identity.

While defending scholars of masculinity against the charge laid by some feminists that they are merely perpetuating masculinist bias, John Tosh has conceded that until relatively recently, such studies have tended to treat masculinity as if it were a unitary, and largely cohesive discourse. An example of this, he alleges, is the fixation on the nineteenth century notion of ‘manliness’.\(^4\) Yet, insists Tosh, not only did individual men necessarily experience their ‘manhood’ differently, but the concept of manliness was itself perennally under challenges from, and defined against, alternative modes of male self-expression. According to RW Connell, the gender-power dynamic in modern societies can thus be understood in terms of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. ‘Hegemonic masculinity’, he writes, ‘is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works’.\(^5\) ‘Hegemonic masculinity’, writes Tosh, ‘makes a crippling distinction not only between men and women, but between different categories of men’.\(^6\) By revealing the inherent incoherence and multiplicity of masculinity throughout history, the study

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\(^2\) For the purposes of this essay ‘masculinity’ denotes all possible cultural expressions of biological maleness while ‘manliness’ and ‘manly’ explicitly refer to the hegemonic masculine norm which prevailed from the late-nineteenth into the twentieth century, which whilst constantly adapting to historical conditions, retained many core characteristics.


\(^4\) ibid., 188.


\(^6\) Tosh, ‘What should Historians do with Masculinity?’, 179.
of masculinities, he argues, thus offers new opportunities for subverting the ideological basis of male privilege.7

The constitution of masculinity cannot be understood without reference to class factors. The social imperatives behind the emergence and dissemination of bourgeois modes of masculinity in particular, must be understood in relation to questions of sexuality and class identity. Indeed as Tosh notes, ‘masculinity is more than social construction’, but demands to be understood as a ‘subjective identity’.8 However, although men may self-reflexively adopt a particular ‘style’ of masculinity through different gender performances, the way in which men experience their masculinity cannot be separated from their social role. An insistence on the subjective nature of masculinity is especially important in considering the possibilities for self-fashioning, as well as opportunities for resistance to hegemonic masculinities.

By the late nineteenth century it was the interests of the ascendant middle-classes that dominated contemporary debate on masculinity. The ideological separation of the public sphere of industry and commerce from the domestic sphere provided the economic basis for the naturalisation of binary constructions of gender.9 Healthy bourgeois masculinity was thus not only defined in opposition to a passive, delicate and decorative femininity, but according to the economic imperatives of that class, legitimating both their secession from a feminised aristocracy and authority over a childlike proletariat.10 ‘Manhood’ denoted not simply anatomical maleness, but an accomplishment. Middle-class manhood depended on men’s ability to provide a livelihood which could sustain a domestic establishment and dependents and Victorian tracts stressed the virtues of useful employment and prudent accumulation.11

However as the British Empire over-extended itself—resulting in declining economic power and increased dependence on its military supremacy—the manly ideal evolved accordingly, embodying a distinctly militaristic ethos which emphasised stoicism, discipline and physical hardness.12 Closely linked to imperial concerns which came to a head during the Boer War, the new neo-Spartan masculinity, as J.A. Mangan has argued, took its rationale from the Darwinian notion of ‘natural selection’. The brutality routinely experienced by upper-class boys at school was calculated to toughen them up for the struggle ahead.13 Outside the Public Schools this rugged imperial manliness was disseminated through popular fiction and youth organizations. In Scouting for Boys which first appeared in 1908, Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Scout movement, warned boys against ‘aimless loafing’,
and exhorted them to enjoy ‘out-of-door manly activities’. 

14 Baden Powell’s ideal was ‘a hefty Rover-Scout...a happy smile on his weather-tanned face’, ‘a healthy, cheery young backwoodsman’, who has ‘made himself a man’. 

With so much emphasis placed on the struggle to achieve and maintain true manliness, the manufacture of deviant masculine types provided the caveat necessary to police this masculine norm. 

16 Behind the fin de siècle fantasy, nurtured by men like Baden Powell, that modern life had triggered a process of racial degeneration, lay the belief that manly vigour was a finite resource which could be too easily wasted. Such anxieties were embodied in the figure of the ‘weakening’, a man rendered perversely effeminate and hysterical by decadent living, excessive study or self-abuse. 

17 The greatest threat to manliness, for Victorians and Edwardians alike, came from masturbation. 

‘The onanist’, wrote Henry Maudsley in 1868, exhibits ‘a want of manliness of appearance as of manliness of feeling’. Indeed their predisposition to neuroses, heart palpitations, vertigo, hypochondria, insomnia, and nightmares, all identified as the stigmata of female hysterics, further confirmed their status as ‘eunuchs’. 

Forty years later Baden Powell concurred that self-abuse ‘brings with it weakness of the head and heart, and if persisted in, idiocy and lunacy’. 

But if a heightened sensibility denoted a want of manliness, it also was also the essential tenet of Victorian aestheticism. As Herbert Sussman writes, the feminisation of culture made the masculine identification of male artists and poets often deeply problematic. In particular the romantic model of artistic manhood that valorised isolation from the commercial sphere, emotional openness and imaginative inwardness seemed drastically at odds with the bourgeois ideal. A friend of Alfred Tennyson responded defensively to criticism of In Memoriam insisting that it was ‘the expression not of heartless sensuality, nor of sickly refinement, nor of fantastic devotion, but of manly love’. 

Similarly, biographers were careful to assert the manliness of Byron and Shelley, although Keats posthumously became the iconic instance of the feminised male poet, his premature death, allegedly hastened by an unkind review, proof of the theory that ‘poetry and manliness are incompatible’.

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15 ibid., 204.

16 McClaren, The Trials of Masculinity, 3.

17 ibid., 137.

18 Cohen, Talk on the Wilde Side, 58.


Yet for some men, aestheticism could also signify resistance to the prevailing bourgeois ideology.\textsuperscript{24} During the 1870s, Walter Pater exhorted young men to pursue beauty rather than commerce, to realise ‘great passions’, and to seek out pleasurable sensations so to ‘get as many pulsations as possible into the given time’.\textsuperscript{25} Even before Oscar Wilde’s sensational demise, aestheticism functioned as a conduit for the subversion of gender and other ideological norms. Indeed as the self-styled representative of Aestheticism and artistic Decadence in Britain, Wilde’s cultivation of a leisured, amoral and effeminate persona represented a deliberate subversion of Victorian notions of masculinity.\textsuperscript{26}

Although the revelation of Wilde’s homosexuality merely reinforced the affinity between a want of manliness and other forms of dissidence, henceforth, any sign of effeminacy or artistic tendencies could arouse suspicion. In \textit{Sexual Inversion}, first published in 1897, Havelock Ellis noted an ‘artistic’ temperament and susceptibility to neurosis in several of his respondents.\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{Memoirs of an aesthete}, Harold Acton recorded popular suspicion of the label ‘aesthete’: ‘One of those scruffy long-haired fellows in peculiar garb, lisping about art for arts sake’.\textsuperscript{28} Wilde’s legacy was felt most keenly by his eldest son Cyril, who before he was killed in action in 1915, wrote ‘I must be a man. There [is] to be no cry of decadent artist, of effeminate aesthete, of weak knee’d degenerate’.\textsuperscript{29} But for other men, the adoption of an aesthetic, even self-consciously effeminate persona, constituted the basis of an emerging homosexual identity. Between the wars ‘artistic’ types such as Acton, Noel Coward and Stephen Tennant, kept the figure of the dandy alive.\textsuperscript{30} These upper-class aesthetes were able to finance their decadent lifestyles and gain access to bohemian social circles where their eccentricity was not only tolerated, but fashionable. Outside this sphere, however, both aestheticism and effeminacy remained a loaded mark of difference.

Wilfred Owen was born in 1893, the eldest child of Susan and Tom Owen, a lowly paid provincial railway employee.\textsuperscript{31} The position of the lower-middle classes, teetering on the brink of poverty yet aspiring to bourgeois ideals, was particularly precarious. According to Wilfred’s younger brother Harold, the family faced a constant struggle to maintain gentility on his father’s meagre salary.\textsuperscript{32} Keen to improve their opportunities for upward social mobility, Susan encouraged her sons to think of themselves as gentlemen, instructing them to disassociate themselves from the children of neighbouring working-class families.\textsuperscript{33}

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Havelock Ellis, \textit{Sexual Inversion}, (London: Wilson and Macmillan, 1897).
\item \textsuperscript{28} Harold Acton, \textit{Memoirs of an Aesthete} (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1948), 1-2.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Sinfield, \textit{The Wilde Century}, 126.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Jon Stallworthy, \textit{Wilfred Owen} (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), 7-12.
\item \textsuperscript{33} ibid., 21-2.
\end{itemize}
Religion also played a part in elevating the family above their material circumstances, Susan’s Evangelism inculcating both Wilfred and Harold with a keen sense of piety and a lasting sexual Puritanism.34 Excluded from the privileged sphere of the Public School but taught to distinguish themselves from the ‘loutishness’ of working-class boys, both brothers were compelled to negotiate their relatively fluid class identity in relation to corresponding expectations of masculine self-expression.

Harold’s memoirs, Journey from Obscurity, offer a rich insight into the rites of passage of lower-middle class manhood. Dominic Hibberd has cast doubt on Harold’s reliability as a narrator, pointing out not only his considerable license, but the extent to which Journey represents what he considered to be an authoritative correction to the many rumours about his brother’s personal life, in particular his homosexuality.35 However, it is possible to read against this, taking not only any possible distortion into account, but also examining how Harold’s portrait might have been constructed in relation to contemporary discourses. Written in the light of his posthumous fame as a war poet, Wilfred’s creative development predictably constitutes a major theme and it seems inevitable that it should have coloured Harold’s recollections. Given the affinity between contemporary models of aesthetic manhood and discourses of deviant masculinity and homosexuality, an ironic oversight on Harold’s part, his portrait of Wilfred as the archetypal poetic genius inadvertently makes for some intriguing double readings.

Establishing Wilfred’s dissimilarity from more ‘average-type schoolboys’ constitutes a major theme. Harold interprets Wilfred’s early ‘studious and somewhat diffident nature’ as inseparable from his ‘literary bent’.36 In keeping himself aloof from the ‘normal ragging and harrying’ indulged in by other schoolboys, Harold recalls his ‘manly and robust’ father’s annoyance with Wilfred’s indifference to ‘normal boyish pursuits’.37 This difference was also marked out by Wilfred’s physical appearance, which if distinctly ‘unboyish’, might be described as slightly feminised: ‘His hands… were expressive and peculiarly indicative. They were always clean, blue-veined, white and delicate looking’.38 This latent ‘abnormality’ caused considerable dissention between his parents, with Susan blamed by her husband for her ‘confounded molly-coddling’ and latterly by Harold for having denied him, ‘if not his boyhood, then his boyishness’.39

Wilfred’s peculiarity, instead of diminishing as he progressed into adolescence, became more pronounced. Despite Tom’s growing concern over his ‘unnatural absorption in his books’ and repeated stipulations that ‘what the boy needed was more fresh air and exercise’, he became increasingly withdrawn and enamoured of poetry.40 As Wilfred’s letters to his mother corroborate, by the time he was seventeen he was
convinced of his own poetic vocation and had begun to emulate the lives of his poet idols, Keats in particular. After the family moved to Shrewsbury, Harold remembers Wilfred as ‘preoccupied with envisaging himself in this somewhat romantic role, so that the prospect of enduring cold and hunger in some dilapidated attic—far from appaling him—had a strong appeal’. Also at this time he started to affect a ‘dandyish’ personal style, wearing his hair long and sporting a purple tie. In a letter to his mother dating from 1912, he identifies himself as ‘an invalid and a poet, by the pulse that cursed in his veins… A Poet again by his economy in Barber’s Bills—and by his frequent glances at the rising moon’.

Yet at the same time, his self-image as a Romantic rebel in the vein of Shelley or Byron was coming into conflict with his mother’s austere Calvinism. Although in the cultural backwater of Shropshire it is unlikely that he had access to the writings of Victorian aestheticism, there is evidence that he was already formulating an aesthetic philosophy of his own at a time when aestheticism of any kind was highly suspect. Reacting against his mother’s Puritanism he told her that ‘his philosophy’ taught ‘that those mortals who have nerves exquisitely responsive to painful sensation, have a perfect right to use them … I know I have a tingling capacity for pleasure … [and] am willing to pay [any] price to purchase delight to the full’. Although such a sentiment might be found in the works of Pater, it seems more probably gleaned from the now respectable Romantics. In one poem he confides to his idol, ‘One friend I love unique/But now, thou canst not dream I love thee Keats’. Elsewhere he describes reading W.M Rosetti’s *Life of Keats* as an emotional, indeed almost sexual experience: ‘I have more than once turned hot and cold and trembly over the first haemorrhage scene; and sobbed over Severn’s ‘He is gone … ‘ Indeed Wilfred’s investment in Keats as the paradigmatic model of poet-hood says much about his conception of the relationship between manliness and poetry.

Yet even while taking refuge in this persona, Wilfred was also painfully aware that it represented a deviation from normative bourgeois masculinity. In another letter he tells his mother that ‘a normal, manly fellow’ might be preferable as a son ‘to an eccentric being like me’. His father’s disapproval of his artistic interests also seems to have contributed to his belief that manliness and poetry were somehow incompatible. When harangued by Tom Owen’s exhortations to ‘[p]lay games’ and take ‘more exercise [and] manly sport,’ Harold recalls that Wilfred’s characteristic response was, ‘I don’t want to be a man. I want to be a poet.’ Whether these were Wilfred’s actual words or invented by

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42 Owen, *Journey*, vol. 1, 179.
43 Hibberd, *Owen the Poet*, 3.
44 Owen, *Letters*, 58
46 Hibberd, *Owen the Poet*, 16
49 ibid., 59.
Harold, they nonetheless convey the deeply conflicted nature of his masculinity. Indeed his affectation of an ‘unmanly’ personal style, intellectual absorption and cultivation of an ‘aesthetic’ sensibility could just as easily be read as symptoms of deviant male adolescent behaviour, and in particular masturbation. Harold recalls his brother as gripped by periods of morbid depression and hypochondria. He describes Wilfred’s ‘unhealthy absorption in his own state of health’, his ‘pallor and weariness’, the ‘blue patches of overstrain’ around his eyes from overwork and his ‘trembling and shivering violently’ when emotionally overwrought. After leaving school at eighteen, Wilfred’s letters home while serving as a lay-assistant at Dunsden Vicarage, also betray a preoccupation with his health and overactive ‘nerves’: He describes several episodes of vertigo, indigestion, palpitations and nightmares, reporting in another that his nerves were in ‘a shocking state’ and his breast continually ‘too full’. This striking symmetry with popular and medical masturbation discourses is significant—if not as an inquiry into Wilfred’s adolescent sexuality—then as evidence of how alternative masculine identities in this period intersected with discourses of pathological abnormality, producing deeply ambivalent social readings. Wilfred’s work at Dunsden came to an end when, no longer able to reconcile religion with his aesthetic creed and growing sexual attraction to one of his young male parishioners, he suffered his first nervous breakdown. As Elaine Showalter has shown, throughout the nineteenth century, nervous disorders were thought to be an exclusively female affliction, caused by the malfunction of the reproductive organs. Not surprisingly, according to Harold, Tom Owen ‘pooh-poohed’ his son’s mental collapse as ‘absolute ‘rot and nonsense’, and one can imagine Wilfred’s shame, given not only the stigma attached to mental illness, but the double calumny of being proved to be so completely wanting in manliness. Such an experience might have compelled Owen, by now in his twentieth year, to conform to expectations of normative manliness. However, upon coming into contact with the ideas of French Decadence after moving to Bordeaux as a Berlitz English teacher, Owen consolidated his sense of himself as an aesthete. As we have seen, with its valorisation of male beauty and emphasis on new and even perverse pleasures, fin de siecle aestheticism also functioned as a conduit for homoerotic desires and a signifier of homosexual orientation. It was in the bustling city-port of Bordeaux, Owen was later to confide to Robert Graves, that he began to seek out sex with other men. Even leaving

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51 Owen, Journey, vol. 1, 161, 251.
52 Owen, Letters, 67.
53 Hibberd, Owen the Poet, 22-3.
54 Showalter, The Female Malady, 34-6.
55 ibid., 172.
56 Owen, Journey, vol. 2, 263.
57 Sinfield, The Wilde Century, 89-98.
58 Hibberd, Owen the Poet, 99.
Aside its Wildean connotations, claiming an aesthetic identity could accommodate homoerotic impulses in a way that the dominant heteronormative masculinity could not. Several extant letters feature rapturous descriptions of boys, including one ‘youth of fifteen’, whose ‘eyes, and indeed his whole countenance’ Owen recalled as ‘the most romantically beautiful’ he had ever beheld.59 On meeting the bisexual poet and dandy Laurent Tailhade, Owen reported he ‘calls my eyes ‘so very lovely!!!’ and my neck ‘the neck of a statue!!! And wants to have my portrait painted’.60 Elsewhere he puts down his failure to acquire a girlfriend to having been unable to find one that can ‘satisfy my sense of beauty’.61 While Susan Owen was oblivious to its significance, Aestheticism could thus serve as a cover for a homoerotic subtext.

After decades of militant feminism which had led to a radical questioning of traditional gender roles and sexual difference, the outbreak of war in 1914, writes Susan Kingsley Kent, seemed to mark the ‘re-masculization’ of English manhood, dispelling fears that Edwardian men had become feminised while reasserting the traditional passivity of women.62 ‘War brings a man closer to existence’, wrote one commentator, ‘It can make life a whole lot greater, richer, fuller and nobler’.63 The equating of war with sport was commonplace. Henry Newbolt’s jingoistic ‘Vitaï Lampada’ with its refrain urging young men to ‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’, inspired countless imitations. The comparison with football was also made, to appeal to a lower-middle and working-class audience. A 1914 Punch cartoon ‘The Greater Game’, depicts a square jawed professional football player with a ball under his arm being admonished by Mr Punch, ‘no doubt you can make money in this field, my friend, but there’s only one field today where you can get honour’.64 If physical strength, honour and courage, the attributes most closely associated with manliness, were prerequisites for volunteering, those who did not enlist, logic dictated, were not men. A 1915 recruitment poster menaced, ‘There are three types of men; those who hear the call and obey, those who delay and the Others. To which do you belong?’65 Those unspecified ‘Others’ it is implied, are scarcely men at all. Accordingly, conscientious objection was associated with homosexuality and artistic decadence.66 The main protagonists of A.T. Fitzroy’s suppressed 1918 novel about the pacifist movement, Despised and Rejected, are all homosexual.67 Some even believed that pacifism might be spread by homosexual liaisons, one journalist warning darkly of the ‘infection of Londoners, especially soldiers, by the doctrine of German urnings’.68

59 Owen, Letters, 124.
61 Owen, Letters, 92.
63 Showalter, The Female Malady, 169
64 Mr Punch’s history of the Great War (London, 1918), 7.
65 Cate Hast, Keep the Home Fires Burning (London: Allen Lane, 1977), 43.
66 Samuel Hynes, A War Imagined: English Culture and the First World War, 217.
68 ibid., 229.
Owen’s immediate response to the outbreak of war was conditioned by his adherence to aesthetic principles. Affecting decadent contempt for the militarism that seemed to be sweeping Europe, the ‘poet of pity’ told his mother that he thought the guns might ‘effect a little useful weeding’. His impression of himself as not ‘a normal manly fellow’, also determined his initial decision not to return to England to enlist. Although he suffered ‘a good deal of shame’ at seeing war propaganda, ‘while those ten thousand lusty louts go on playing football’, he reasoned that his potential as a poetic genius made his life worth more to his country than his death. While over three million men answered Kitchener’s call to arms, the year 1915 found Owen not in khaki, but employed as a sales representative for a French perfume manufacturer. However as casualties mounted, his letters show that he was starting to resign himself to the inevitability of enlistment: ‘I don’t want the bore of training, nor yet to save my honour before inquisitive grandchildren fifty years hence. But I now do most intensely want to fight’. Not completely neglecting his aesthetic sensibility, Owen enlisted in the Artist’s Rifles. Yet despite misgivings about his suitability for military life, he was pleasantly surprised to discover the endless drilling, exercise and discipline congenial. ‘I am stupidly, muscularly tired’, he told his mother, ‘Yesterday morning we went on a Route March. This morning we had ‘Physical Drill’ under a special Gymnastic instructor [who] gives plenty of exercise to the risible Muscles… I never felt such devotion’. Gone too were his poetic locks: ‘I wear my hair half an inch long now’. Harold also marked a change when he visited him at camp, noting despite his ‘frightful military crop’, ‘an unusual appearance of physical well-being’: ‘I was particularly struck by the stockily built, robust appearance he had about him … as I looked at his bare torso, I was amazed to realise what a fine little barrel of a chest he possessed’.

Indeed with the demand for manpower, the male physique became a focus of military and medical expertise. It was a truth championed by recruitment propaganda that men’s bodies were ‘made masculine’ through military drill. Servicemen often commented that they becoming ‘heavier, taller, confident, clean and straight’, and that military life was ‘doing wonders’ for them. Neither were improvements purely physical. One soldier told his sister of a brother officer, ‘in civilian life a most fastidious merchant … See him now, he eats anything, never reports sick and has never had to fall out on a long march. He is one fellow to whom the army has done a bit of good’. In this sense, Owen was another. The unmanly aesthete with his hypochondria and ‘tingling nerves’ had been
replaced by a perceptibly healthier, disciplined Army recruit. In place of his ‘funny old Wilfred’, Harold found ‘a soldier and an officer’.79

But if the war could make a man, it could also break him. Not only did the war expose the male body to hideous disfigurement and mutilation, but constant shelling and the trauma of killing and maiming a faceless enemy also made men’s minds vulnerable to breakdown. During 1916, neurasthenia, or ‘shell-shock’ as it came to be known, accounted for 40 per cent of all British causalities, with a total of some 80,000 cases treated at Army hospitals by the war’s cessation.80 Yet while bodily wounding and dismemberment were considered honourable, shell-shock was widely misunderstood and commonly regarded as a form of ‘malingering’.81 Indeed notes Elaine Showalter, when any refusal to fight was considered unmanly, even a sympathetic diagnosis that recognised shock as a legitimate form of hysteria rather than straightforward cowardice tended to imply not only moral weakness, but effeminacy or even latent homosexuality. Certainly the classical Freudian analysis of ‘war neurotics’ maintained that such men were passive, narcissistic and probably impotent to begin with.82 A 1918 textbook on war neuroses details the case of one private who ‘showed a tendency to abnormality in his make up’, being ‘rather self-conscious, inclined to keep to himself [and] always shy with girls’.83 In this way the direct challenge that the behaviour of shell-shocked men posed to the dominant construction of normative masculinity could be displaced onto those deviant masculine types whose abrogation of manliness already rendered them pathological.

If he had found training congenial, Owen’s first experiences of modern warfare severely offended his aesthetic sensibilities. ‘I suppose I can endure cold and fatigue and the face-to-face death as well as another’, he wrote home, ‘but extra for me there is the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises … everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, … [these are] the most execrable sights on earth’.84 After four months of Duty at the Front he was sent down to the Casualty Clearing Station, ‘labelled Neurasthenia’. ‘I did not go sick or anything, but [the Doctor] is nervous about my nerves … Do not for a moment suppose I have had a “breakdown”, he reassured his mother, ‘I am simply avoiding one’.85 His doctors did not agree and sent him to be rehabilitated at the Craiglockhart War Hospital outside Edinburgh. The circumstances that led to Owen’s diagnosis are unclear but there is evidence to suggest that he had been harshly reprimanded by his Commanding Officer and Robert Graves was later to claim that ‘it preyed on his mind that he had been unjustly accused of cowardice’.86 Asking his mother not to let anyone outside the family

79 Owen, Journey, 3.155.
80 Bourke, Dismembering the Male, 109.
81 ibid., 48, 108.
82 Showalter, The Female Malady, 172.
84 Owen, Letters, 217.
85 ibid., 239.
know of his whereabouts, his letters testify to his mental confusion, depression and sense of shame.87

Craiglockhart was a disheartening place. Siegfried Sassoon described it as ‘a gloomy and cavernous ... a live museum of neuroses’ inhabited by ‘160 more or less dotty officers ... a great many of them degenerate looking’.88 Since shell-shocked men were deemed ‘childish and infantile’, they had to be induced to face their illness ‘in a manly way’.89 Owen’s treatment was supervised by Dr Arthur Brock who saw shell-shock as symptomatic of modern man’s alienation from nature. Whether he was aware of Owen’s earlier mental breakdown or homosexuality, the idea behind Brock’s prescribed ‘Ergotherapy’ was to regenerate the shell-shocked man through industrious activity.90 Under Brock’s surveillance Owen attended Botany lectures, joined a Field Club, took up visiting slums and became editor of the hospital magazine The Hydra.91 It was also here that, after meeting Sassoon, he began to write the poems that were to establish his posthumous reputation. Many of these explore the conflicted experience of masculinity in wartime: the young amputee in ‘Disabled’ who has followed Mr. Punch’s advice recalls his lost football career and notices ‘how the women’s eyes/Pass from him to the strong men that are whole’.92 Another describes the suicide of a soldier unable to live up to the manly ideal under endless shell-fire.93

Literary criticism was not the only gift Sassoon bestowed upon his new friend. Upon leaving Craiglockhart he presented Owen with a letter of introduction to Robert Ross, Wilde’s devoted friend and literary executor, thus giving him an entrée into the cultured and bohemian homosexual circle over which Ross presided in London. Through Ross, Owen at last had access to the decadent milieu to which he had aspired since adolescence.94 During the winter of 1917-18 there is evidence to suggest that he was reading Wilde’s poetry as well as De Profundis and possibly The Picture of Dorian Gray.95 According to Hibberd it seems likely that Sassoon also introduced Owen to the writings of the Socialist and sex reformer Edward Carpenter, whose ideas about homosexuality radically challenged the dominant medical and popular discourses of the day.96 As members of an ‘intermediate sex’ combining male and female characteristics, Carpenter even believed that far from being degenerate, homosexual men and women in fact represented ‘a higher type of humanity’ and were gifted with a ‘finer artistic sensibility’.97 Not that this made them effeminate. ‘A very large percentage, perhaps the majority of [Uranians],’ he insisted, ‘possess thoroughly masculine powers of mind and body’, and are ‘muscular and well built’.98 It was through a reading

87 Owen, Letters, 257-60.
89 Bourke, ‘Effeminacy, Ethnicity and the End of Trauma’, 59.
90 Hibberd, New Biography, 253-5.
91 ibid., 559-61.
93 ibid., 74-5.
94 ibid., 282.
95 Owen, Letters, 316.
96 Hibberd, A New Biography, 268.
98 ibid.
of Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* that Sassoon had been able to reconcile his love of hunting and cricket with his homoerotic desires. If Hibberd is correct, Owen would have discovered that it was possible to be simultaneously manly, a poet, and homosexual.

By summer 1918 Owen was judged to be rehabilitated and was expecting to be sent back to the Western Front. Relieved to hear that his eccentric son had recovered from his unmanly affliction, Tom Owen wrote to him; ‘gratified to know you are normal again’. Although he still suffered from the occasional nightmare, his self-discipline had paid off and he had completed enough poetry to publish. His letters suggest that he was in good physical health and spirits. ‘Went on a Cross Country Run last Wednesday, from which my calves are still suffering. Have seldom enjoyed exercise so much. Refereeed [sic] a Football Match yesterday!!’ Harold Owen and several of Owen’s biographers have represented his return to France as a courageous act of martyrdom. Harold has his brother say rather stiffly ‘I know I shall be killed. But it’s the only place that I can make my protest from’. In the end, as he psychologically prepared himself to again face the horrors that had led to his breakdown, Owen in fact had little choice in the matter. Nevertheless he seems to have felt a strong obligation to return, perhaps feeling that doing so would remove the stigma of alleged cowardice. ‘I am glad’, he reassured his mother, ‘[t]hat is I am much gladder to be going out again than afraid. I shall be better able to cry my outcry, playing my part’. Yet at least politically, this logic was deeply flawed. Owen’s anti-war protest would arguably have been infinitely more courageous and effective had he become, if not a ‘wishy-washy’ pacifist of the kind he despised, then a principled ‘objector’. Yet to do so, would certainly have meant facing harsh social censure, imprisonment and even his execution by the State. At least in returning to France, Owen could believe that he had gained mastery over himself. At the last he conformed to bourgeois expectations of real masculinity, winning an M.C. for ‘conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty’ during an counter-attack in which he captured a German machine gun and in the words of the citation, ‘inflicted serious losses on the enemy’. In proving his manliness thus, he also renounced his ‘exquisitely responsive’ sensibility and ultimately his ability to feel: ‘My nerves are in perfect order’ he confirmed, ‘I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not’. A month later he was killed.

As this study has aimed to illustrate far from an indomitable monolith, masculinities are perpetually contested and fraught with instability. Although one type of masculinity might become hegemonic in any context, this is constructed in relation not just to femininity, but other

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100 Owen, *Letters*, 337.
101 ibid., 336.
masculinities that simultaneously reinforce and challenge its dominance. As Owen’s example shows, these masculinities also provide opportunities for alternative modes of self-expression and identity to the prescribed hetero-normative masculinity, although such behaviour may produce deeply and contested social meanings. Through a combined process of social consensus and punitive discipline the bourgeois ideal is thus reasserted and re-validated. Nevertheless, as Owen’s courageous attempts to fashion alternative masculine styles suggest, the performative nature of masculinity permits not merely resistance to oppressive gender roles, but the possibility for even more radical challenges to sustained male privilege.

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