

Susan Schweik: On "Gay Chaps at the Bar"

From the start, "Gay Chaps" links itself directly and indirectly both to soldiers' letters and to soldier poetry. Its title and epigraph derive explicitly, as I have said, from a letter to the author from a "Lieutenant William Couch, in the South Pacific." After an opening dedication to Brooks's brother ("souvenir for Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks and every other soldier"), words from one of Couch's letters immediately follow: ". . . and guys I knew in the States, young officers, return from the front crying and trembling. Gay chaps at the bar in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York. . . ." More implicitly, but in ways which would probably have been legible to many regular readers of the wartime *Negro Story*, the poem reworks another text written by Couch--not a letter from the front, but a war poem printed in that journal five months before the first publications of the sonnets which would comprise "Gay Chaps." Here, too, the governing figure of the "bar" occurs:

To a Soldier

Here

where the cock sounds his synchronized song
in a sunless morning
and the caravans of young move towards the
battlefronts ...

(O, brother say!)

The planted cannon replies to the
last word, living urge of flesh
that aimlessly scratched the ground with
bayonet point
or, valiant, alert, stealthily moved into hell

(O, brother)

but this is a neat note
and we shall not shed tears
home from the bar in silence ...

Couch's poem presents itself as the painful, self-limiting address of a soldier to a soldier, of a brother to a brother; it counters its own calls for authentic response to the horror and alienation of the battlefield ("O brother say!") with the tight-lipped obligations of masculine self-censorship ("but this is a neat note / and we shall not shed tears"). Brooks's "Gay Chaps at the Bar," taking up from Couch both the subject of the soldier's language and the central bar image, inserts itself within this straining dialogue, interrupting what brothers have to say to brothers with what promises momentarily to be a sisterly response ("souvenir for Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks").

From the first word of the first sonnet, however, it is clear that the poetic voice of "Gay Chaps" will answer back as the voice of a brother--or rather, of brothers, since the poem has multiple speakers; it represents the collective voice of the veteran combatants which Wilfred Owen, in his "Insensibility," had called the "We Wise." The "souvenir" for soldiers promptly metamorphoses into the memory of soldiers (that is, owned by soldiers). Like the troops in the British Great War poems which inaugurated the modern literary tradition of war poetry, the "We" of "gay chaps" are angry recorders of an aftermath. The poem is structured around a clear ironic contrast between after and before, front and homes:

[. . . .]

This sonnet may be read as an extended meditation on and transformation of the conventional meanings of two word-kernels: "bar" and "order." Each has a doubled range of

associations, one related to alcohol and to heterosexual pleasure, the other to struggle and to prowess in conflict. Thus to be "at the bar" means, in the poem's world of before, "to be in the place where one knows how to drink, to seduce and tantalize women." But in combat and its aftermath, the bar takes on a range of other sinister meanings; a blockage or obstacle, a marker of lines, it signifies not only the "color bar" of racist structures which the Black soldier breaks through into battle but also, as in the crossed "bar" of Tennyson's famous poem, judgment and death. "Order" begins as a verb indicating sure possession of language in the context of the barroom, and adds in the later part of the poem an additional military denotation, a more potent command; the sonnet ends, however, in an explicit denial of the efficacy of men's language. It concludes, on the battleground, after the carnage, with a series of nothings, nos, nots, inhibitions, losses.

At the outset of this group of sonnets, both "bar" and "order" summon suggestions of control, of competence, of male power--only for the first poem to dispel them. The epigraph which begins the poetic series establishes an image of shattered masculine selfhood and a pattern of traumatized return ("return from the front crying and trembling") which underlies the entire sequence. Only in the second poem, "still do I keep my look, my identity," does Brooks focus on the death of a soldier, with a characteristic combination of grim depiction of rigor mortis and loving insistence on the dead man's individuality. The subject of the eleven other sonnets, over and over, is the veteran's stunned survival and his "incompleteness," his resumption, as the third sonnet puts it, "on such legs as are left me, in such heart / As I can manage."

This hint of amputation recalls Owen's "Disabled," a comparison which reveals one important way in which "Gay Chaps" repudiates as well as duplicates the conventions of the modern masculine soldier poem. "Disabled"'s war-wounded protagonist notices with bitterness how the same women's eyes which had goaded him to war "passed from him to the strong men that were whole." "Gay Chaps" records a similar transition from masculine power to impotence, but although the first sonnet places women in the barroom to gaze at the men in their glorious displays of nightlife style, it absents women entirely from the battlefield and its aftermath. It refrains - and this is crucial - from including a female spectator in the second half of the poem, and does so, I believe, to resist the image of the demonic, instigating female gaze which for Owen and other literary men in the ironic tradition constituted the beginning and the end of aggression.

This strategy of omission, within what otherwise reads as a strikingly oppositional and anti-heroic Second War poem, serves two functions. In its representation of trauma without emasculation, its refusal of symbolic castration, its insistence on the continuing dignity and authority of the veteran, it mounts a defense of the soldier. But it also, of course, defends the woman who defends the soldier. Transforming the "stuff of letters" written to a woman into a dramatic veterans chorus speaking to no one, "Gay Chaps at the Bar" from its first poem certifies that this act of mimesis, this masculine masking, will be undertaken in a spirit of feminine humility, that it has been motivated by the energy of empathy, and that when the soldier says "I am incomplete" he is not the victim of untoward female glee. One distinct sign of that commitment is the curious disappearance of women from the opening sonnet at the moment at which it first represents the consequences of combat; present neither as readers of soldiers' letters nor as spectators, women vanish, exempted from the antagonisms of sexual difference in wartime and from the war poem's pressures of address.

The sequence's first poem, "gay chaps," seems to shy away, then, from the central image of the culpable modern female spectator whose various shapes I have traced in earlier chapters.

But that figure, barely suppressed, soon reappears at the heart of the fourth sonnet, the one entitled, aptly, "looking." In "looking" alone, among those "soldier sonnets," the subject of the poem becomes a woman's subjectivity. As its title suggests, this sonnet explicitly explores the situation of the woman who, left behind in war, looks on; enacting a paradigmatic wartime plot, it grapples with questions about the politics, the ethics, and the efficacy of women's language and of the female gaze:

[. . .]

"Elsewhere of 'matter,'" Irigaray writes in "The Power of Discourse," beginning to map the imagined terrain which edges against and lies beyond the realm of masculine discourse. She proceeds to elaborate on what she means by "matter": "mother-matter-nature" (77). Irigaray's formulation of the mother's relation to mimesis is worth quoting at length at the outset of a discussion of "looking," for it bears on what the "matter" is within the representation of the maternal in this soldier sonnet. "If women can play with mimesis," Irigaray continues, "it is because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation. . . ."

Because they have always nourished this operation? Is not the "first" stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself? As guardians of "nature," are not women the ones who maintain, thus who make possible, the resource of mimesis for men? For the logos? (77)

Women, Irigaray suggests, are in one sense the makers and founders of mimesis: it is women, the first reproducers, who are supposed to provide and tend the fertile ground of the "natural" upon which all linguistic and cultural reproductions build. Nurturer and embodiment of the "real" from which all figurations turn and to which all realisms attach, the woman-as-mother selflessly empowers the symbolic order. Brooks's "looking" develops, in part, a similar mythology of feminine relation to systems of representation mastered by men. Effective language, in this sonnet, is imaged repeatedly as masculine; words with clout are either "male" themselves ("brawny" and "heavy," like a burly Marine), or they are fed, with maternal affection, by a woman to a man. The woman's word, an apple handed to the son so he can chew it "with masculine satisfaction," is no forbidden fruit; this is not Eve's apple, not a challenge to the logos, but the word as snack, offered by a mother (or by a woman acting, in wifely or girlish submission, like a mother) who properly maintains her position as natural resource.

"Looking" represents this order of things, however, only in a state of acute disruption: "You have no word for soldiers to enjoy." The tone here, at the start of a series of melancholy and deprecatory imperatives, bears a close resemblance to the inflections of voice in the growing wartime genre of advice literature for soldier's families, whose dual purpose was to recognize new anxieties and promote a new kind of emergency good manners. The crisis of the war disturbed, redefined, even sometimes drastically altered, women's understanding, and their cultures understanding, of their roles as nourishers of the symbolic order; "looking" records and responds to that upheaval.

Like some of the most interesting examples of home-front advice literature (a body of texts which Susan Hartmann has categorized, memorably, as "prescriptions for Penelope,") "looking" wavers ambiguously between prescription and description, between speaking to and speaking for its female subject. It may be read either as a removed - even condescending -

scolding, or as a self-revealing monologue only barely masked by the guarded use of "you" instead of "I." The form of address maintains, of course, the fiction of mimesis, keeping the woman at a careful distance in a poetic sequence whose decorum demands the consistent perspective of the masculine soldier. But the choice of the second person as governing pronoun takes on other ramifications, both aesthetic and political, when we read it, in a female-authored text, as a strategy of feminine self-representation.

This kind of address to a feminine second-person occurs in *A Street in Bronzeville* not only in this "soldier sonnet," part of a larger group of poems whose clear project is to mimic men, but also in what is perhaps Brooks's best-known dramatic monologue in a female voice: her representation of "The Mother." Barbara Johnson has illuminated the operations of the apostrophe to a "you" in the famous opening line of that poem, "Abortions will not let you forget":

The "you" can be seen as an "I" that has become alienated, distanced from itself, and combined with a generalized other, which includes and feminizes the reader of the poem. The grammatical I/thou starting point of traditional apostrophe has been replaced by a structure in which the speaker is simultaneously eclipsed, alienated, and confused with the addressees.

It is not, I think, accidental that "looking" shares with this poem about abortion the eclipses, alienations, and confusions of a self-objectified "I/ you." To willingly give up a son to the military in wartime can feel like a failure of nurture, like a murder of one's own child. "Any death of a child," Johnson writes, may be perceived "as a crime committed by the mother, something a mother ought by definition to be able to prevent" (198). In the face of the fear of that crime, and in the struggle between senses of guilt and of innocence, of coercion and of choice, maternal selfhood in both poems splits and blurs.

But here the two poems begin to differ, for if "The Mother," the abortion poem, violates taboos by too nearly severing abortion from criminality, "looking," the war poem, risks transgression if it too closely links maternal sacrifice to criminal negligence. In the forties, having an abortion was forbidden; letting the son of age be drafted or enlist was mandatory. Abortion would be done in secret; mother-son separation in the name of patriotism might be conducted with a show of public pride. At the same time, voluntary abortion was in some part an assertion of decisive will, while maternal sacrifice was in some part, as "looking" makes clear, a capitulation to the unpreventable. Brooks herself describes this difference sharply, in a comment on the persona of her abortion poem: the woman who aborts a child, she writes, is "hardly your crowned and praised and 'customary' Mother; but a Mother not unfamiliar, who decides that she, rather than her World, will kill her children."

These distinctions underlie several important differences in the function and effect of the structures of address in the two poems; they help to explain why the feminization of the reader which Johnson describes seems startling in "The Mother" but conventional in "looking," and why "The Mother" can move from the second person to a female "I," while "looking" does not and cannot. The mother in the soldier sonnet, crowned and praised and customary, remains from start to finish locked within the systems of war and gender. Nancy Huston has neatly summed up--"Women are required to breed, just as men are required to brawl."

"Looking" exacts this maternal service, but it also enacts the ways in which it takes its toll. In

wartime, the poem suggests, linguistic system which the mother used to nourish collapse; an alternative is then proposed a maternal look - which scarcely suffices better. Unlike the masculine loss of words in "gay chaps," which is represented with clear irony and outrage, the feminine lack of words in "looking" seems guilty, the anger associated with it far more internalized and self-reflexive. The same holds true for the feminine look the poem counsels; here the female spectator, both the one who looks on and the one who is looked at looking on, struggles, anxiously and painfully, under the pressure of the advice which constitutes and represents her, to put on the right maternal face for the soldier.

But "even that is vain." "Looking" suggests the vanity of expression is a double sense. Not only will the possible arranged gestures for the woman on the threshold - words or looks - "little avail" against the buffeting storm of the war, but that woman's expressions will also, in a sense, exist in vain, in vanity, signs of a constant awareness, as if she held a mirror up to her face, of the etiquette of feminine wartime response. It is in this representation of self-consciousness, I would argue, that we might find the most distinct traces of a critical feminine difference in this soldier sonnet. For the sad, odd rhetoric of advice-giving maintained throughout the poem raises a subversive possibility. If the proper feminine language and posture in the scene of parting do not surface unbidden from an ordinary reservoir of maternal feeling, if they may or must be stylized and scripted, then even mother-love itself, that most natural of resources, might be susceptible to, even composed of, mimics.

In the end, though, "looking"?'s subversive anxieties give way to a more conservative emotional appeal, a pathos best understood in the context of the very popular discourse in the mass culture of the forties which Mary Ann Doane has called "maternal melodrama." Like the wartime films Doane analyzes in her *The Desire to Desire*, "looking" enacts a scenario of mother/child separation, focusing on what Doane calls

the contradictory position of the mother within patriarchal society--a position formulated by the injunction that she focus desire on the child and the subsequent demand to give up the child to the social order. Motherhood is conceived as the always uneasy conjunction of an absolute closeness and a forced distance. The scenario of "watching the child from afar" thus constitutes itself as the privileged tableau of the genre.... (74)

And like the "weepies" Doane describes, "looking" exhibits "a distrust of language, locating the fullness of meaning elsewhere," aiming to "recover for meaning what is outside meaning" by affirming the primacy of "nonlinguistic registers" (85). Although, as I have said, "looking" makes the maternal look and gesture problematic by asserting their vanity, opening the possibility of a critical distance between the mother and her son, the mother and her motherhood, and the reader and maternal ideology, its closing lines accomplish the end defined by Doane: "The pathos which plays a dominant role in maternal melodrama works to close the gap between spectator and text" (178). The excessive language of pathos in Brooks's lines - "The touch or look or word, will little avail, / The brawniest will not beat back the storm / Nor the heaviest haul your little boy from harm" - the woman's language, "your little boy," confirms the presence of a spontaneous motherly grief, and affirms a maternal and filial bond which cannot be undone. In an exact reversal of the movement in "gay chaps" from masculine verbal potency to verbal impotence, "looking" gestures finally toward a redemptive silence, rooting it in boundless, inexpressible maternal power of feeling. This recuperation of the "spontaneously" maternal is, however, drastically limited, both by the poem's governing

structure of negation and by maternal melodrama's stereotyped script.

In the midst of a series of poems which mimic masculine representations of soldiers' experience, "looking" anatomizes the position of the female spectator from "inside"--a second-person inside which tends disturbingly, until the final words of the poem, to fuse and be confused with roles externally imposed. It comes as no surprise that the one figure of feminine subjectivity and interiority these well-mimed soldier sonnets are able to admit takes the shape of a mother. The maternal self-consciousness which "looking" renders is far less transgressive and far more permissible within the war poem than other forms of more sexually narcissistic feminine self-regard. Irigaray ends her survey of the "elsewhere of matter" with a warning about the limits and the vulnerability of the mother's position: "Mother-matter-nature must go on forever nourishing speculation. But this re-source is also rejected as the waste product of reflection, cast outside as what resists it.... Besides the ambivalence that the nourishing phallic mother attracts to herself, this function leaves women's sexual pleasure aside" (77). No sooner has "looking" with finely tuned ambivalence played out the scene, so central to war systems, in which soldier and mother must simultaneously embrace and detach than the troubling question of the "elsewhere of female pleasure" surfaces, with a disturbingly familiar ring, in "Gay Chaps at the Bar."

The next sonnets in the sequence depict desirable women, lovers of soldiers, who live wholly in the realm of a surface aesthetic which is unable to recognize, and which attempts to repel, the deep disturbances that war causes in past and distant places. Two companion pieces, "piano after war" and "mentors," share an identical pattern. In both, a soldier speaker who envisions his survival after war's end rejects the imagined seductive image of a present woman for the company of dead, remembered fellow soldiers. He swears to imprison himself in recall - not to "thaw," not to "rejuvenate," not, in a real sense, to survive: "I swear to keep the dead upon my mind" (69).

The female objects of desire - and objects of the punishing repudiation of desire - in these poems are represented as sirens, in keeping with the older ironic, anti-heroic war poetry tradition upon which this sonnet series so insistently calls. Femmes fatales, they tempt soldiers and civilizations to ignore history, to forget the truth about military conflict, to dally in the realm of trivial detail. They wear flowers in their hair and dance at banquets, or play piano "on a snug evening" with "cleverly ringed" fingers. Possessing no observable self-knowledge or knowledge of destruction, they produce a powerful but superficial form of art without war.

Through these female figures, "Gay Chaps" takes up a question central to many texts within the developing canon of war literature in the Second War period (the war poems of Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur come immediately to mind): the place of aesthetic impulses in the war poem and in a world at war, or, as we might say, the proper aesthetics of war. Other texts written before and after this one embody the threat of an aesthetics which cannot incorporate pain in women. The veteran Krebs in Hemingway's paradigmatic "Soldier's Home," for instance, is represented as feeling this way about girls on his return: "He liked the look of them.... But the world they were in was not the world he was in.... They were such a nice pattern. He liked the pattern. It was exciting. But he would not go through all the talking. He did not want one badly enough. He liked to look at them all, though. It was not worth it." The speaker of Brooks's "piano after war," imagining himself haunted by the ghosts of soldiers, deadened and unable to respond to the attractions of the woman who serenades him, shares Krebs's world. Both texts place themselves within the broad field of home-front cultural discourses which represented the ex-soldier's alienation. Both engage, too, in a common literary project: testing the power and the failure of aesthetic pleasure in wartime

through stories about breaches between patterned women and battered men.

But there the resemblance ends. "Soldier's Home" and "piano after war" disclose an identical subject, the estranged veteran; they do so, however, in acutely divergent ways. I want to pause here briefly for a closer look at their differences in form and style, for in those disparities we might locate in Brooks's sonnet a potentially severe disruption of the orderly processes of imitation and identification, exposing - if only momentarily - visible, crooked seams in the ostensibly smooth mask of the soldier.

The language of the narrative passage from "Soldier's Home" is curt, stuttered, telegraphic; it enacts exactly Krebs's traumatized resistance to aestheticism and the feminine. This is, of course, classic Hemingway style: the art hiding its art, the masculine reticence which signifies, even as it suppresses, a hidden depth, the famous iceberg effect Hemingway described as "7/8 of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate, and it only strengthens your iceberg." In this description of Krebs's frozen impassivity, form and content perfectly coincide.

"Piano after war," in contrast, strives after no iceberg effect; in fact, this sonnet courts melting, demands a thaw, revels in a liquid musicality:

[. . .]

The visual imagery of "piano after war" replicates exactly the conventions of ironic masculine war poetry: the male gaze objectifies a woman who is both seductive and sinister. But the poetic voice flows oddly counter to that perspective--pretty, polished, musical, it aligns itself with those manners and values which home-front culture and the poem itself define as feminine. Once again Mary Ann Doane's work on forties cinema is pertinent: in the classic "woman's film," the love story, Doane writes, music is "the bad object . . . the site of overindulgent or excessive affect . . . constrained by its confinement to female subjectivity" (103). Here, as "piano after war" represents the veteran's paranoia in audaciously lyric, excessively melodious language, content and style rupture and work openly against each other.

The self-conscious Shakespearian rhetoric of a line like "That sometimes after sunset warms the west" suggests another context for interpretation of the poem's form and diction: "piano after war" raises, more insistently than any previous part of the "Gay Chaps" sequence, the question of the soldier's relation to the sonnet. Brooks used sonnet form habitually and expertly throughout the forties; Stacy Carson Hubbard, in her groundbreaking analysis, has described the dynamics of form in another sonnet, "First fight. Then fiddle," published in Brooks's next book which also opposes combat to the lyric and to music:

Like a jazz riff, it undoes and redoes its own chosen model, stopping short where the line extends, racing past where the rhyme calls halt, and plying the stiffness of iambic pentameter with syntactical interruptions and occasional dactylic and spondaic intrusions.... This counterpointing of the sonnet's formal devices works to ironize from within both the poem's relation to literary tradition and to non-discursive action.

In comparison to the nervy energy of "First Fight. Then Fiddle," "piano after war"'s relentlessly pretty negotiations with sonnet form seem placid and listless. Here, perhaps, the conservative

pressures inherent in the particular mimetic project of "Gay Chaps" may take their toll. The struggle over which must have priority, war or poetry, is represented in "First Fight" as a productive argument within the self, an ironic tension worked out vigorously within the voice. But "piano after war," caught inside the reactionary sexual conventions of the dominant masculine ironic war poetry tradition, seems to divide these values and attributes between men and women, creating oppositional categories rendered as inert and essential, deploying all its irony at the expense of the female "other." Since its claims to represent male experience depend on stigmatizing a "feminine" lyric impulse which is, in fact, its own, "piano after war" might be said to fail miserably, interestingly, performing and enacting a crisis of mimesis.

How, then, to judge that "failure"? After all, the tricky play with mimesis as Irigaray formulates it works only to the extent that it manages to open a gap between style and essence, the "here" of the text and an "elsewhere." Otherwise it ceases to be playful or critical, becoming instead simply docile, sober: complicit mimesis itself. Couldn't this "failing," then, constitute the success of "piano after war"?

Perhaps, but finally, like "looking" with its appeal to maternal pathos, "piano after war" aims less toward a radical crisis in gendered structures than toward a liberal conciliation. It is important to note that the piano-playing scene on which the poem centers takes place within a dramatic monologue and in the future tense: "On a snug evening I shall watch her fingers." The veteran's denial of a feminine aesthetics is represented not as accomplished fact but as desperate fantasy, a process of shifting from longing to mistrust, from opening to foreclosure, from the will to survive to a deliberate deadening, which exemplifies the trauma of the soldier. The dynamic of "shall," its willed projection into the future, implicitly raises the possibility that the speaker might move beyond his impassivity, might heal; the woman's music--a music the poem itself, the speaker's desire itself, releases--might, however suspect, be an integral part of that process.

Moreover, as in all Brooks's poems, a reading of sexual differences in "piano after war" is complicated, if not altered, by the presence of other factors: differences of race and color. The female figure here is not obviously a "fair lady" like the Negro Hero's paramour; she is not racially marked with categorical certainty. But in the context of the entire collection of poems in which "Gay Chaps" was the concluding sequences book preoccupied, as Gloria T. Hull puts it, with "the browns, blacks, tans, chocolates, and yellows of Afro-American color ... especially as this schema victimizes [Brooks's] darker-skinned female character"--this woman's racial ambiguity demands and frustrates identification. "On a snug evening I shall watch her fingers, / Cleverly ringed, declining to clever pink, / Beg glory from the willing keys": Are these the fingers of a Black or a white woman? The reduction of the female body down to this one small detail seems carefully designed to collapse the usual fine light and dark distinctions of heroine description, to suggest, cautiously, women of two races.

In Street in Bronzeville as a whole, however, Brooks's poetic voice characterizes itself not only by lush musicality but also, as Barbara Christian puts it, by "harsh cutting edges." And in that volume the poems repeatedly chart distinctions between privileged women who obey the standards of the upper middle class and poor women who can't or won't, between light- and darker-skinned women, between Black and white women. In this larger context, "piano after war"'s lady of the rosy-fingered sunset with lyric power at her fingertips wields only limited power and bears only limited guilt.

Still, within the more narrow compass of "Gay Chaps at the Bar," the failure of coherence between subject and enunciation in "piano after war," its odd disjunctive breaks between a

mode defined as feminine and a perspective resolutely masculine, raise pressing questions about the possibilities of cross-gender identification and about the gender of voice and style. Those contradictions escalate and multiply in two heavily stylized later poems in the series, "love notes" I and II. The "love notes," as their generic titles make clear, openly confront the conventions both of the courtly love sonnet and of forties V-letter form. Here, finally, the "stuff of letters" from front to home, man to woman, is mimicked directly, but reworked in ways which disturb the norms of both Petrarchan tradition and its modern wartime counterpart. In these two poems, the focus shifts from character and dramatic scene (as in the earlier sonnets) to sheer rhetoric; the gendered conceits of the love note are mustered and disrupted one after another in a highly mannered display of stylistic ingenuity:

[. . .]

Critics have frequently, and usefully, read these two sonnets as extended manipulations of one controlling metaphor: woman-as-flag, or flag-as-woman, a figure related to the female Democracy we viewed through the eyes of the Negro Hero. Like the Black soldier in that earlier poem, the speaker of the "love notes" strongly resembles the unrequited lovers of Renaissance sonnet tradition, vacillating, in eloquent alternations, between bitter despair and compensatory idealization. The flag/nation/lover here bears all the defining features of the Petrarchan lady; "she" is both the object of desire, tyrannical and fickle, who thwarts the speaker's needs with careless cruelty and the chaste object of love whom he vows to serve faithfully. The wit of the "love notes" lies primarily in the way they translate received gestures of poetic courtship - in particular, the motivating ambivalence which seems to drive love sonnet tradition - into the battlefield, harnessing that familiar rhetorical volatility to express the emotional and intellectual struggle of the Black soldier.

To render democracy as a female figure is one thing. To collapse a woman into a flag goes one step further, reducing the representation of the soldier's allegiance to an almost entirely abstract sign-system, a pure semiotics of war, democracy, and gender. The "love notes" thus constitute "Gay Chaps"'s most condensed and sharpest engagement with the "stuff" of love and war poetry. Combined, they replicate a system in which the brandishing and embellishment of a female figurehead go always, inexorably, hand in hand with her punishment. Both poems invoke the intimate, hopeful modes of address of the Second War V-letter; each offers tempered declarations of the faithfulness of lovers to each other, of soldiers to their cause, of nations to their defenders. But the predominant tone, until the second sonnet's attempt to recuperate the lover at its close, is one not only of doubt but of active hostility.

Like the governing metaphor, "Woman's face is a shield," which Nancy Vickers has analyzed in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*, the link of woman to flag in the "love notes" draws on the double meaning of the traditional blason whose workings I have already traced in the conventional V-letter poems of the forties: its association with military heraldry as well as with the poetic catalogue of praise - or blame - of a woman's body. In the "bits of saucy color" worshipped and scorned by Brooks's soldier, as in the "heraldry of *Lucrece*' face" glossed by Vickers, "the colors of a woman's flesh] ... are indistinguishable from the 'colors' of heraldry--which, in turn, are indistinguishable from the 'colors' of ... rhetoric," and the consequence of these conflated figures is identical to that described by Vickers for the raped *Lucrece*: "a stylized fragmentation and reification of the female body that both transcends the familiar clichés of the battle of the sexes and stops the reader short ... the female body is mastered through polarized figurations that can only denigrate or idealize." The gendered tropes in "Gay Chaps at the Bar" end here, in a pair of "love notes," more hostile than wistful, which unsparingly

mimic misogyny. What, then, are (and were) the political effects of that mimicry? Could this indictment of the "insolent" and "changeable" Democracy-as-woman avoid rebounding onto real women -including (and beginning with) the author herself?

Once again, the misogyny enacted here is first of all in the service of a protest against racial oppression. This represented soldier, as Elizabeth Young has put it, has received a "Dear John" letter from the nation. And so the "Love Notes" strip bare the consoling idealizations of dominant forties V-letter form, of poems in which the needs of the girl back home and the needs of the national government so seamlessly and comfortably entwine. These two ironic poems generally refuse the sentiment which poems like Karl Shapiro's had reintroduced into the modern ironic war poetry tradition; they choose to emphasize violence - sexual violence, too - over violets.

We can read the mimicry of male sexual antagonism here, then, as part of a critique of U.S. racism, one accomplished through a turn back toward the harsh protest misogynies of earlier Great War poetry and away from the self-congratulatory morale-building of the current V-letter-as-sweet-love-letter vogue. But in "Gay Chaps at the Bar" overall, the ironic tradition of modern war poetry is also subjected to revision. By the end of the sequence all gender distinctions collapse. That collapse, as the series represents it, is a sign of reconciliation - but it is also, finally, in this war poem, a symptom of catastrophe.

On the one hand, these sonnets' adroit mimicries function to secure and exemplify universal empathy for the soldier. Poems like the "love notes," "mentors," and "piano after war" are, on the one hand, patently imitative of - even obedient to - the authoritative tradition of the modern masculine ironic war poem as it came out of the First World War; they render a world laid to waste by war by opening up a conventional gap, a wasteland, between men and women. But they also, by the sheer, known fact of their Black female authorship alone, swerve from that tradition. The "Gay Chaps" sequence displays a triumphant power of sympathetic identification which allows Brooks as author, not just reader, to become her soldiers - even to the point of giving voice to their sexual anxieties about and antagonisms with women. Paradoxically, Brooks mends the split between the woman and the literary soldier by writing war poems which insist upon that split. In effect, her demonstrable ability to mimic perfectly a modern masculine war poem subverts the gender division upon which such poems have been predicated, defending women against the attacks of the war poetry tradition by proving a feminine capacity for fellow-feeling, for the "right stuff."

But in its final poem, on the other hand, "Gay Chaps at the Bar" offers a bleaker representation of the power of mimesis. "the progress" depicts American Second World War society, both military and civilian, as a culture of mimicry, in which everyone - of all races, men and women - must assume the requisite alien masquerade:

[. . .]

Here the "world elsewhere" is figured as a hollowness inside, mimesis as a deadening outward conformity imposed by militarism--even more harshly on men than on women. The extent to which all distinguishing categories collapse is suggested by the implicit reference to fascism as well as militarism in "the step of iron feet again"; fascism, often represented in American women's Second War writing as an exaggeration of gender or other divisions, here is figured rather as a universal mechanical invariability. Across the wide white space in the last line, possibilities project themselves--wildness, resistance; but the repetition of "again. And again" suggests that in totalitarian total-war-making wildness is indistinguishable from

iron uniformity.

In the light of this last poem, the "uniform" structure of the sonnets in this series, each with its own subordinated small letter title, comes to seem a kind of parody of the endless repeating round of salutes and songs represented here. "Brooks manipulates the image of the sonnet as confined and structured," writes Stacy Hubbard, "so as to highlight the paradoxical nature of those forms and rituals (poetry, war, funerals) which both define, immortalize, and kill." In 'the progress,' not only the war poem but all sanctioned behavior in the war culture are represented as capitulation in paradoxical forms; if ritual can render you, like Brooks's mother, "crowned" and "praised" and "customary," it can also kill you and your kind. As Brooks herself put it, in a poem entitled "Revision of the Invocation (The Negro: His Pleas Against Intolerance)" which won Negro Story's literary prize in 1945,

... Where massive horror is rhythmic in the world

This is game-playing.

But the toys are all grotesque

And not for lovely hands; are dangerous,

Serrate in open and artful places.

In such a world, at such a time, this poem and the final sonnet in "Gay Chaps" imply, playing with mimesis is no game. It is, as adults say to children, like playing with matches, or, as adults say to adults, like playing with fire.

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