

**‘People want to see tears’: Military heroes and the ‘constant Penelope’
of the Military Wives Choir**

Alice Cree

*School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon
Tyne, UK*

Alice.cree@newcastle.ac.uk

Orcid ID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3810-3211>

‘People want to see tears’: Military heroes and the ‘constant Penelope’ of the Military Wives Choir

This article offers a feminist analysis of the UK’s Military Wives Choir as a vehicle for depicting the subject of the ‘Penelope’ military wife. The Penelope subject is characterised by patriotic feminine stoicism, and is a figure through which the masculine military hero is created and reflected. This paper will use the example of the Military Wives Choir to argue that the making of the Penelope military wife subject in the national imagination is an important means through which women married to servicemen are rendered useful for the military. Drawing on primary fieldwork with the Plymouth branch of the choir alongside an analysis of secondary material such as song lyrics and Gareth Malone’s BBC television programme *The Choir: Military Wives*, my discussion will centre on three themes; lyrics & music, history & time of the state, and violence & representation. By discussing the making of the Penelope subject through these lenses, this paper will contend that there are clear, yet often nuanced, forms of violence at work in the representation of the choir. And yet, as this article will conclude, in order to shed a more textured light on this violence what is needed is a critical and in-depth engagement with the lived experiences of the women of the choir.

Keywords: Military Wives Choir; Military Wives; Critical Military Studies; Feminist Geopolitics; Gender.

Funding details

The work was supported by the ESRC under grant number 1332438.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author.

Biographical note

Alice Cree is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Geography, Politics & Sociology at Newcastle University, UK. Her main area of expertise is in Critical Military Studies, with a particular focus on military wives, as well as feminist and creative methodologies. She holds a PhD in Political Geography from Durham University.

Word count: 9,419.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Rachel Woodward, Louise Amoore, the editor, and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on the paper at various stages of the writing process. Thanks also to members of the Plymouth Military Wives Choir for being so generous with their time during this research.

Introduction

‘...Shrewd Odysseus!... You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius’ daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope’

- *The Odyssey*, Book 24 (191-194)⁴⁷ (from *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood)

Penelope, wife of Odysseus in Homer’s great epic *The Odyssey*, is a dominant image in Western culture of feminine stoicism and sacrifice. In the absence of her warrior husband, Penelope is defined by ‘how loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth’, sitting at home for twenty years waiting patiently for his return. Odysseus is the military hero, the embodiment of masculinity and protectorship, while Penelope is his antithesis, the feminised other, and all that must be protected. The Penelope subject as the embodiment of feminine sacrifice has been deconstructed and troubled by feminist scholars such as Lawrence (1994) and Murnaghan (1994), among others, and indeed re-written by authors and poets such as Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad*, and Carol Ann Duffy in her critical collection titled *The World’s Wife* (2015 [1999]). In Atwood’s critical take on Penelope, the heroine says to the reader;

‘Hadn’t I been faithful? Hadn’t I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why wouldn’t they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours! But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl’ (*The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood).

In this reading, we see Penelope's internal struggle with the role she has come to take on. As I will show later in this paper, this is a critical voice that must be heard in future research with military wives.

If we read these more critical accounts of Penelope alongside feminist scholarship on gender, nationhood and militarisms (for example Goldstein 2001; Sharp 1996; Mayer 2000), we can see that the masculine/feminine binary they embody are very much mirrored in our understandings of the nation, and the state-military relationship. The nation-state is profoundly gendered as masculine (Hooper 2012); it has even been suggested that a 'nation' can itself be defined as 'two males defending the women and children in a specific territory' (see Yuval-Davis 2004, 130). As such, the relationship between the 'masculine defender' and the 'feminine defended' is central to our very understanding of what a nation is. Even following recent moves in Western state armed forces to widen access women have to military roles (see King 2017; Woodward & Duncanson 2017), these gendered narratives still remain pervasive and powerful.

Of course, these narratives trickle down further to the everyday geopolitical imaginations of the individual military hero; there can be no military hero without his doting wife at home. According to Via (2010), hero narratives centre around the existence of not only the masculine defender of the nation, but also the feminine other through whom he is brought into recognition. She argues that;

'A large part of the gendered roles in and around militarism can be accounted for by understanding the centrality of hero narratives to both soldiering and citizenship. In these narratives, the heroic warrior defends the feminised other for the good of the self, family and country' (Via 2010, 45).

In the contemporary context, we can see evidence of these heroic narratives emerging in new ways, permeating popular culture and beyond into even the most banal and prosaic corners of everyday life. This article will contend that there is a clear violence to how

these narratives permeate the intimate spaces of the 'home front', and how in particular the endearing yet powerful military-hero-with-military-wife image is mobilised in popular culture in ways that impact the everyday lives of military wives. The violence of military activities plays out not only in the spaces of war and the militarised cultures and discourses that spiral out from them across civil society, but in also in domestic spaces in which *real lives are lived*. As this paper will show, the forms that this violence takes are diverse and nuanced, working at once overtly, through the recasting of contemporary wars via the nostalgic tropes of sacrifice and remembrance, and more subtly, as powerful affects that circulate through music and voice.

That this article highlights the gendered processes through which heroic and nationalist military narratives emerge is not *new*. Rather, this paper emerges as part of a much wider project in feminist geopolitics to centre the role of gender and attend to the embodied experiences of women in these political processes (see Mayer 2004). Work in feminist political geography has done much to explore nationalisms and militarisms as profoundly gendered, and as manifesting not only in formal [P]olitical sites, but also in everyday, intimate and domestic spaces (see for example Sharp 2000; Dowler & Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004, 2007; Fluri 2009). Such work has for example critiqued the male state/female nation binary which lies at the heart of many discursive national imaginaries (Sharp 1996; Mayer 2000), shed light on the textual invisibility of the political labour conducted by women throughout history (Gilmartin & Kofman 2004), and explored the gendered tropes through which support for contemporary wars has been gleaned (Fluri 2011). One of the key contributions made to this scholarship by the following paper is a critical engagement with these gendered tropes against the backdrop of what John Kelly (2012) refers to as the contemporary 'hero-fication strategy', in which gendered nationalisms and militarisms can be seen to emerge in new ways.

Traditional narratives of heroism and sacrifice have clearly been troubled in the face of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The characterisation of the soldier as a heroic and moral defender of the nation was disturbed by the so-called ‘War on Terror’, a war of doubtful legitimacy for which public support was low. What follows was, as Kelly (2012) tells us, ‘a discursive formation circumventing questions of political legitimacy’, which became ‘institutionalised as the way to frame the WoT’ (p724; see also Woodward *et al.*, 2009). As the discourses of a ‘war on terror’ begin to erode, we start to see a new phenomenon in contemporary discourses of military phenomena emerge, in which the heroic figure of the soldier was required to be reclaimed and celebrated in renewed ways. The contemporary manifestation of this figure is unique, mobilising the most banal modes of representation alongside a burgeoning celebrity culture in which *military heroes are celebrities*. Kelly (2012, 733) refers to this phenomenon of prosaic representations as a ‘hero-fication strategy’, in which rhetoric circulates that

“‘the troops’ do a great job and they’re (“our”) “heroes” by virtue of the fact they are British military alone, irrespective of the actual ‘work’ being done...the tributes to bravery, selflessness, courage and heroism are required in order to assuage the nation’s grief over the death of another British soldier. It is also to show due demeanour of revulsion and annihilation towards those who publicly dissent.’

Kelly (2012) claims that the ‘willing media and culture industry’ is recruited in this ‘joint chain of ceremony’, pointing to a complex structure through which such narratives come to permeate everyday life and annihilate the possibility for critique.

We can see countless manifestations of this strategy emerging in recent years. The figure of the military hero is affectively powerful, creeping into the most banal and prosaic moments of daily life. One simply has to look to the presence of ‘eggs for soldiers’ (Tidy 2015) on the shelves of British supermarkets, or the Help for Heroes charity wristbands hanging from the wrists of adults and children alike, to see how ‘narratives of

heroism and sacrifice' (Edkins 2011, 132) have permeated the most intimate corners of everyday life. Indeed, 2007 sees the founding of Help for Heroes, a UK military charity which by their own admission captured something in the national imagination, a desire to support 'our boys' rooted in ideas of patriotism and the sacrifice of the armed forces. Soon after, we see amputee Iraq war veterans on *Dancing With the Stars*, and disabled military veterans competing for their countries in the Invictus Games. It is no coincidence that in Christmas 2011, we see the Military Wives Choir topping the charts; after all, there can be no military hero without a military wife at home waiting for him. The Military Wives Choir provides perhaps the most poignant contemporary example of how the 'Penelope' military wife subject is mobilised in popular culture (see Baker, in press). The military wives of the choir are, in the national imagination, embodiments of nationhood and patriotic sacrifice, projecting a core tenet of militaristic heroic narratives that 'physically fighting (and dying) for a national interest is perceived as masculine, whereas it is the proper sphere of women to sacrifice within the home to defend those interests' (Horn 2010, 62).

This paper will seek to shed light on the ways in which this 'Penelope' figure of the military wife is brought into recognition through the Military Wives Choir. Drawing on primary fieldwork with the Plymouth branch of the choir alongside an analysis of secondary material such as song lyrics and Gareth Malone's BBC programme *The Choir: Military Wives*, this paper will focus on three main themes; lyrics & music, history & time of the state, and violence & representation. In my discussion of these themes, I will argue that the Penelope military wife is harnessed as a subject through which to project heroic narratives, and thus remake the violence of contemporary warfare as morally justified. In order to situate these arguments, it will first be important to further flesh out the political imperative of harnessing military wives in this way. The following section

of this paper will therefore draw on the work of Enloe (1983) and others to argue that such mobilisation of military wives addresses the ‘political problem’ that they pose.

Penelope and the *Political Problem*

Much has been written on how gender is harnessed in the preservation of the military, its ideals, and its operations. Cynthia Enloe has written extensively on the role that women play in processes of militarisation (see for example Enloe 1983, 1990, 2000), arguing that ‘all spheres of a woman’s life can and have been militarized’ (1983, 264). Indeed, she tells us that;

‘In each country military strategists need women. They need women who will act and think as patriarchy expects women to act and think. And they need women whose use can be disguised, so that the military can remain the quintessentially “masculine” institution, the bastion of “manliness”’ (Enloe 1983, 220).

The gendering of militarised identities and narratives plays out in service of the state and the military in many different ways. For example, Synne Dyvik (2014) discusses the construction of women both as ‘practitioners’ and ‘targets’ in counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, while Megan MacKenzie (2015) argues that the myth of ‘the Band of Brothers’ is in part upheld by the systematic exclusion of women from close combat roles (see also Woodward & Winter 2007; Basham 2008; Henry & Natanel 2016; King 2017).

The role of women in upholding military ideals extends beyond their participation in armed combat. That military wives engage in countless forms of hidden labour has long been understood as integral to the functioning of the military as an institution (Enloe 1983, 1990, 2000; Basham & Catignani 2018; Hyde 2016, 2017; Horn 2010; Jervis 2011). Alex Hyde has recently discussed this labour as at once ‘material, discursive and emotional’ (2016, 857), and therefore goes some way to shedding light on the different *kinds* of work that wives are doing for the military. As Enloe tells us in *Does Khaki*

Become You (1983), the necessity of this labour is tied to the ‘political problem’ that military wives can pose. The wives of servicemen pose a potential problem, in that they have the opportunity (and arguably the motivation) to challenge their husbands’ loyalties to the military and the nation. Yet, at the same time they can be harnessed and mobilised in ways conducive to the aims of the armed forces;

‘If those women can be socialised to become ‘military wives’, they can perhaps further some of the military’s own goals. For instance, women as military wives can help win civilian support and sympathy for the military by making it seem a less brutal or insulated institution. And military wives can – if controlled – give male soldiers emotional support and incentives to “act like men” in battle’ (Enloe 1983, 48).

But it is not only that, as Horn (2010) argues, military wives are ‘socialised to accept their role as caretaker and peacemakers, and further socialised to accept that these issues are secondary issues, a footnote to the “national security interest”’ (p62). Rather, beyond their own socialisation there is a crucial role for them in the national imagination. As Enloe argues, if such women can ‘act and think as patriarchy expects women to act and think’ (1983, 220), then they can be harnessed in order to gain civilian support and sympathy for the military. In the context of the current ‘hero-fication strategy’ of contemporary militarism, this role is all the more important. As Horn (2010) puts it;

‘The effect of fighting a war with an all-volunteer force, however, is that this kind of rhetoric is made all the more necessary – the war has not touched most civilians’ personal lives in any significant way (aside from those with friends and family involved in the war), meaning that sympathy and loyalty must be derived for those who are suffering the consequences of the war. Military men and women are then cast as selfless heroes, and their families as unwavering patriots’ (p59).

This is nowhere better illustrated than in the example of the Military Wives Choir. The choir reflect the positioning of those ‘suffering the consequences of war’ in the realm of

popular culture, a means of at once restating the selfless heroism of their husbands, and inviting the participatory support of audiences. Victoria Basham makes this point nicely;

‘The packaging of these emotionally-charged gendered performances of war’s effects on “our boys” and the women and (girl) children they leave behind as hit singles, allowed the wider British public to personalise war. Objecting to such heartfelt expressions of support for soldiers would be hard-hearted, cynical or snobbish; even if an effect of remaining silent is to back “our boys”, “wherever they are” and whatever they do (Barnett 2012)’ (Basham 2016, 889).

In ‘personalising’ war through the gendered performances of the choir, the discursive labour done by the choir serves to remake the violence of the military in ways conducive to the aims of the sovereign state, while preventing the possibility for critique or dissent.

The framing of military heroes in relation to the suffering of their wives further points to the reciprocal relationship of obligation between civil society and the military hero; yes, he is obligated to us, but crucially, *we are obligated to him*. In the frailty and grief of the military wife we can see a metaphor for wider civil society in need of protection, and at the same time can see what is sacrificed ‘at home’. The making of the ‘Penelope’ figure of the military wife in the Military Wives Choir, for example, allows the frailty of the protected state to be translated onto more banal, prosaic and intimate spaces, harnessing the relationship between the family unit and the wider concerns of the nation. The following sections of this paper will provide a more in-depth discussion of the Military Wives Choir, the discursive labour that they do, and the ways in which they harness our obligation to the military hero.

About the Choir: Gareth Malone and ‘*The Choir: Military Wives*’

The Military Wives Choir was given a public face in 2011 by UK TV personality Gareth Malone, who formed the choir with the aim of helping wives and girlfriends of

servicemen to express themselves through song, particularly when their partners were deployed. The choir's journey was documented for the BBC in a programme titled *The Choir: Military Wives*, which followed them as they worked towards a performance at the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall in November 2011. The military wives performed an original song titled 'Wherever You are', which was later released as a charity single for SSAFA and the Royal British Legion in December 2011. In selling more than 556,000 copies, 'Wherever You Are' claimed the UK Christmas number 1. Today, there are more than 70 Military Wives Choirs across the UK and beyond.

The significance of *The Choir: Military Wives* in crafting a particular representation of the women of the choir cannot be overstated. The programme itself was widely watched across the UK, airing on BBC2 in the prime slot of 9pm-10pm. It generated huge public interest in the choir, and several follow up series' such as *The Choir: A Year On* and *The Choir: New Military Wives*, which followed 'choirmaster Gareth Malone, as he forms a special Military Wives choir to perform at a WW1 centenary prom at London's Royal Albert Hall, alongside the cast of War Horse' (BBC 2014). The narrative put forward in *The Choir: Military Wives* was one heavily embedded in and inscribed with gendered military logics. The series took the starting point that the wives 'needed a voice, and this is about giving them a voice right now' (Gareth Malone, *The Choir: Military Wives*, Episode 2); yet, crucially, this is not a voice that can speak freely. Reiterated throughout each episode of the series is that 'their husbands are away fighting in Afghanistan', 'The women's husbands have been away for nearly two months' (*The Choir: Military Wives*, Episode 2). We are reminded time and time again that 'You wake up thinking of them, you go to bed thinking of them...' and, as one choir member points out, 'It's not action man playing here, this is real stuff' (*The Choir: Military Wives*, Episode 2). To a critical eye, there is of course a violence in this, that 'this is real stuff',

yet it is made into a spectacle for consumption. Indeed, this violence is made particularly striking in light of the subsequent emergence of Military Wives Choir merchandise, including a line of homeware and accessories from M&Co which donates ‘a percentage’ of the profits to the Military Wives Choir Foundation charity (M&Co 2018). The Military Wives Choir Foundation was formed following the success of their debut single *Wherever You Are*, which raised over £500,000 for military charities (Military Wives Choir Foundation 2016). The Military Wives Choir Foundation, which ‘encapsulates all of the choirs, a small central support team and the Board of Trustees, is an independent charity and subsidiary of SSAFA’ (Military Wives Choir Foundation 2018). At branch-level, choirs are run by a committee of choir member volunteers, alongside a musical director. There are no male choir members. That there is a marketable brand to the choir is arguably telling about the wider capitalist project to profit from the violence of war within which these women are enrolled.

While *The Choir* lays claim to being an important means of release and distraction for its members, what is more striking is the wider value placed on the choir. One member is shown saying ‘For me, singing with the girls is singing for all wives [read: military wives]... it’s really emotional’, while Malone says of one performance the choir give; ‘Gig is the wrong word... this is a ceremony’ (*The Choir: Military Wives*, Episode 2). *The Choir* does not shy away from the inherent violence of military life, illustrating its lived impacts through the voices of military wives. Crucially though, the articulation of these experiences through the speech act of singing is given meaning and imperative for the state; ‘this is a ceremony’. Performances of the choir are rendered ceremonial, almost sacred, reclamations of the heroic military subject. Indeed, these narratives play out through particular characters in the series, and are overtly gendered. The series follows for example one member of the Chivenor choir, Samantha, someone who lacked

confidence in her own abilities but who possessed a powerful singing voice, in her journey towards performing a solo at the Royal Albert Hall. Narrations of Sam's personal experience are peppered with clips of her pushing a pram carrying her infant child, making cups of tea, talking to the camera from the domestic space of her home. As Episode 2 follows the choir in the lead up to a performance at Sandhurst, the narration of their nerves and the significance of performing in such a formal military institution are similarly coloured with clips of women trying on dresses, getting fake tans, and painting their nails. We see the women in tears, hugging, expressing the emotion of trying to articulate the violence and pain of their lived military experiences. We are reminded time and time again of the (feminine) sacrifice that military wives make 'for their husbands' and by extension for their country, encouraged to pity them, support them, and venerate their husbands. Even the story of the choir on the foundation website from the outset describes its members in relation to their husbands; 'whilst UK Armed Forces were deployed in Afghanistan, Gareth Malone arrived at military bases in Chivenor and Plymouth to film the TV programme "The Choir: Military Wives"...Those choirs, galvanised by the support from each other whilst husbands were away, unexpectedly enjoyed amazing success... [and] created an unprecedented level of public empathy for military wives and girlfriends' (Military Wives Choir Foundation 2016). The military wife subject presented through *The Choir: Military Wives* is, like Penelope, always virtuous, true to her husband, and defined only in relation to his absence.

The Military Wives Choir, Plymouth

The primary aspect of this data collection was undertaken with the Plymouth branch of the Military Wives Choir. My research consisted of twelve months of phased fieldwork, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. I attended choir rehearsals, public performances and fundraising events, all of which helped shape my

analysis of *The Choir: Military Wives*, their repertoire of songs, CD imagery and promotional material. The access I gained, and rapport I built with choir members, was largely a result of having the right ‘contacts’, as is so often the case in military research (see Baker *et al.*, 2016), and having a pre-existing relationship with participant Theresa made it far easier to build trust with other members. The following sections of this paper will draw on a diverse data set to explore the nuanced ways in which the ‘Penelope’ subject of the military wife is brought into recognition through the choir. My discussion will focus in particular on three themes, which reflect the breadth of examples through which the politics of recognition at work in the choir emerge: lyrics and music; history and time of the state; and violence and representation.

Lyrics and music

While *The Choir* draws heavily on the intense emotional experiences of the women, the mobilisation of this feeling and affect goes far beyond the narratives shown in the television series. Rather, to truly appreciate the affective power of the choir, one has to engage with their music as a genre through which the Penelope subject can appear.

On a superficial level, the choir’s repertoire itself illustrates how the military hero is produced in relation to his wife Penelope. The overwhelming focus on songs about the absence of their husbands depicts a particular image of the military spouse, one which shows them to be the doting wife, the feminised ‘other’ to the masculine hero ‘self’. Their first album ‘In My Dreams’ (2012) narrates a story that largely revolves around relationships with military husbands, and the pain of their absence, mirroring the characterisation of Penelope as the one ‘who is left behind’ (Lawrence 1994, 9). At this level, it is the representation to consumers through particular song lyrics that is significant. In ‘With or Without You’, for example, the focus is on absence and loss – unfortunately the lyrics for these songs are copyright protected, and so direct quotations

cannot be given in this paper, however they can be viewed with just a quick Google search. Indeed, the technicalities of the music lends itself easily to the creation of these kinds of speech acts. Several songs, such as ‘Wherever You Are’, use a piano solo ‘lead-in’ and ‘lead-out’ at the beginning and end of the song, which works to reinforce the sense of seclusion and loneliness put forward through the lyrics. The use of multi-harmonic choral music, often found in traditional Christian church music, invokes visions of angelic virtue and a sense of awe or importance that cannot be adequately articulated through words alone. This relation with church music is deliberately cultivated in ‘With or Without You’ (from *In My Dreams* 2012), in which the vocals are made to reverberate and mimic the echoing sound of performing in a church. The use of harmonic thirds and fifths in the choir’s music works to generate a ‘bigger’ sound, heightening the listeners’ sense of awe.

The feeling generated by such music transcends the capability of spoken (or sung) speech acts, in that they can be felt before they can be understood. ‘Wherever You Are’ reminds the listener of the awe inspiring music of Elgar’s Nimrod (from *Enigma Variations*), from which meaning and a sense of imperative can be gained without necessarily being able to understand the lyrics. This sense of importance imparted by the very music of the choir depicts the military wife and the hero within readily available tropes and narratives of heroism and sacrifice, echoing what Gareth Malone tells the audience in *The Choir: Military Wives* that ‘this is a ceremony’ with a *higher purpose*.

The claim that there is a much ‘higher purpose’ to the military hero and his wife can be seen not only in statements such as ‘this is a ceremony’ or in the sense of imperative imparted through the affective power of the music. Rather, the lyrics to the Military Wives bestselling Christmas number 1 single ‘Wherever You Are’ provide arguably the most clear example of this claim, although again these lyrics are copyright

protected and cannot be reproduced in this paper. Important to note, however, is that the lyrics depict a very specific representation of the military 'hero', in which his role is totally morally unambiguous and necessary. The violence conducted by individual servicemen and women, and indeed by the wider military, is re-shaped and rendered invisible. Indeed, by drawing on images of 'light' and 'darkness', the world becomes distilled down into light and dark, heroes and villains, with the role of the British military being clearly heroic and legitimate. Furthermore, the notion put forward in the lyrics that military partners will be kept safe, wherever they are, by their wives' love positions the military wife as the feminine carer of the masculine hero, and constructs a fairytale-like relationship between her and her husband – one which crucially appeals to audiences and consumers. The violence displayed by the choir is not the violent warfare of the armed forces against other nations, but rather the violence against *them* of their husbands' absence 'until [their] task is done'. The Military Wives Choir therefore perform a particular kind of proximity to violence, in which the violence and horrors of warfare are brought into visibility, but only through the lens of the wives who grieve their husbands' absence. Thus, the impacts of armed conflict are rewritten through the voices of the patriotic wives who are left behind.

History and time of the state

The rewriting of military violence is exemplified not only in the lyrics of the songs they sing, but more broadly in the nostalgic image they perform. The Plymouth branch of the choir undertake a number of local as well as national performances events every year, not least of which is the annual Armed Forces Weekend performance on the Hoe (seafront) in Plymouth. During my fieldwork I attended the 2016 celebration, where the choir performed on stage later in the afternoon. Many of the songs sung by the choir in this performance had clear historical roots (e.g. 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', 'Silver

Tassie'), and deliberately invoked an image of the military wife linked to patriotism and self-sacrifice. As I was told by choir members, the songs they sing depended on the event they were performing at; as such, the focus on songs linked with previous wars was a deliberate means of appealing to and 'connecting with' an audience primed for nostalgia and patriotism. The mobilisation of a specific, historically rooted image of the military wife serves to blur boundaries between older, 'moral' wars in which the role of the armed forces was clearer and considered justified, and contemporary wars. The subject is therefore located clearly within the linear time of the state (Closs Stephens 2009), an understanding of nationhood and belonging which 'violently installs itself as both origin and end of the culturally thinkable' (Butler 2008, 19).

The choir appears as an example of what Jenkins *et al.*, (2012) refer to as 'the rehabilitation of the military in the aftermath of the Iraq war, and the legitimisation of the Afghanistan war' (p361). Jo Tidy (2015, 8) similarly argues that the less-comfortable aspects of contemporary wars are removed from public discourse in part through a 'nostalgia-based memory narrative' which harnesses 'vintage' tropes regarding World Wars One and Two as wars well fought. The choir capitalise on the clear historical roots of their representation in order to appeal to their audience and generate support, particularly with older generations. Several women I spoke to said that the people who attend their performances were largely older men and women;

Theresa: Yeah they like to see a few tears in a gig don't they, they get a bigger applause if someone cries, much bigger [laughs] standing ovations usually if a couple of people cry

Emma: It's the world war two thing isn't it, they remember packing their men off

Theresa: And I think obviously with a lot of what we're singing that resonates quite strongly with them, and they respect what we do as military wives, so you know it's tough on the men but it's also tough on us, and actually it is quite nice to see that, and I think

for the elder audience when we let ourselves be upset during a gig... I think they feel quite honoured that we feel comfortable letting down our barriers in front of them and I think just as a sign of respect and also empathy they feel the need to stand up when they clap. Doesn't happen so much with the younger generations if there's young people in the audience, but if they've not been through it then they don't understand'

(Focus group extract, Theresa & Emma)

According to these women, one of the things about the choir that older audience members can relate to is that they play a similar kind of role to their own in previous war times. They remember 'packing their men off', and in choir performances can see these women articulating the same kinds of emotions that they felt. The representation of the Military Wives Choir thus contributes to the notional blurring of boundaries between old 'well fought' wars and contemporary wars (see Tidy 2015). In this example, we can see how the narratives of absence and loss that characterise Penelope are deliberately mobilised in the staging of the choir and their performances, in order to appeal to audiences and generate support.

The deliberate invocation of nostalgia for past 'well fought wars' can be further seen in what Basham (2016, 889) describes as the 'appropriate femininity' of the choir. This 'appropriate femininity' is illustrated clear by their 2012 album 'In My Dreams', the cover for which features an image of a serviceman in uniform walking hand in hand across a green landscape with his female partner (read: wife) and two children (the album artwork is, again, copyright protected by Universal Music and so cannot be reproduced here). The woman wears a floor length feminine dress, with her hair pinned up in a demure and modest style, representing the 'appropriate femininity' of the military wife depicted by the choir (Basham 2016, 889). The soldier and his family walk towards a rising (or setting) sun, on the horizon of a typically British, nostalgic landscape. The scene depicts a carefully chosen image of 'England's green and pleasant land', with a mass of

poppies around their feet in the foreground of the image, but at the same time invokes a sense of danger, of something being at stake, at risk of being lost. Indeed, the silhouetted figures, as Roderick (2009) tells us, draw upon ‘long-standing and well-established visual convention of treating the human shadow as a virtual “index” for the inner qualities or essence of the individual’ (p81; see also Woodward *et al.*, 2009). The image illustrates the importance of the figure of the military hero to the family unit, but also to a wider sense of nationhood. In this instance, the feminine wife reinforces the masculinity of her husband, his role as defender of the nation and her subsequent feminised representation of the women and children he protects.

During my field research this ‘appropriate femininity’ was also exemplified in the choir’s performance at the annual Plymouth Armed Forces weekend;



Figure 1 Military Wives Choir, Plymouth Armed Forces Weekend 2016

‘I wandered over to the stage where the choir were about to perform, sliding through throngs of young parents with their children, and older couples with sandwiches and

plastic cups of beer. I settled just in front of the stage against the railing, next to a few excitable elderly ladies in shawls. The choir's musical director Rhys soon came to the stage to introduce the ladies, who trooped in in a uniform line, wearing matching outfits and wide - but perhaps nervous - smiles. Their red t-shirts had single white flowers pinned to the chest, and were paired with white trousers and union jack neckerchiefs tied loosely around their necks'

(Extract from fieldnotes, Armed Forces Weekend, Plymouth).

The women dress in matching outfits, patriotic colours of red and white with union jack neckerchiefs (Figure 1). They present a clear display of stoic feminine patriotism which tugs at the heart strings of an audience primed for nationalist nostalgia, and which mirrors the virtue and unwavering dedication of the Penelope subject. This to me really exemplified the role of the choir in these wider relations between nation, state and the nostalgia of militarised popular (Tidy 2015). The invoking of such 'nostalgic' images and cultural symbols of bygone wartimes as union jack neckerchiefs and popular songs of World War One points again to the mobilisation of the military wife in this political imaginary. Such 'nostalgic invocations of the long-past, morally virtuous "vintage" world wars' (Tidy 2015, 2) produce a subject who embodies the sacrifice made by the armed forces 'for their country', and creates strong ties in the public imagination between the contemporary military wife, and the military wives of previous wars (and classical literature) who stayed home to wait for their husbands, often for years at a time. The power that these narratives have on audience members was palpable during their performance at the 2016 Armed Forces Day celebration, evident in the excited bustling of elderly ladies to get to the front, or the remarks of the man next to me at the bar who said that he had come to see the choir because he had 'a lot of respect for what they're doing'. And yet, as the following section of this paper will show, there is a clear violence inflicted on these women by the Penelope representation of the choir.

Violence and representation

As an earlier section of this paper highlights, a significant role in the representation of the choir to the public can be attributed to the BBC's coverage in *The Choir: Military Wives*. Of the women I spoke to, several had been involved in the original televised programme. In a conversation with one member who had participated in the series, I asked if she knew how the production team chose the specific members they followed;

‘I think some of it is Gareth [Malone]’s decision but a lot of it is governed by the production team and what they think would make a good story.’

(Interview extract, Theresa)

This element of what ‘would make a good story’ is integral to the representation of the choir that we see in the television programme. One choir member told me that particular situations in the programme were staged in order to portray a particular kind of linear relation between the figure of the military wife and the state. One participant, who had been involved in *The Choir: Military Wives*, told me that;

‘In the TV stuff I’ve done, the production team go out of their way to create situations where people will be upset or uncomfortable or sad and they want it on camera and its actually genuinely insensitive... they made us sing for a plane coming back from Afghanistan and they made these poor people come in and listen to us sing “The Snow” some really random Elgar choral piece and we’re like... we don’t want to be here, these people just want to go home, they want to be with their wives, and we all just felt so massively uncomfortable, but the production team who know nothing of what it could possibly be like coming back from Afghanistan or being someone waiting back home were just like THIS IS FANTASTIC LETS GET IT ALL ON CAMERA’

(Interview extract, Theresa)

The women were asked to perform in front of returning servicemen (and women) who they did not know, in order to tell a ‘good story’, one which positions the military wife firmly within the narratives of heroism and sacrifice surrounding the military, and

implicates them as ‘wavers of the flag’, uncritical beacons of patriotism. That these women felt deeply uncomfortable being there was obscured from view in pursuit of this vision. Theresa suggests that the production team for the series structured these scenes in order to invoke emotional responses from both the choir members and the audience. Thus, it became clear that these women were all too aware of the representation of the choir that the BBC were seeking to create (and capitalise on). Theresa told me that there was always a cameraman ‘sitting on the sidelines waiting for someone to cry’. This staging of emotional responses is a means through which sympathy and support for the military wives (and subsequently for the military) is generated and reinforced, creating a situation in which ‘objecting to such heartfelt expressions of support for soldiers would be hard-hearted, cynical or snobbish; even if an effect of remaining silent is to back “our boys”, “wherever they are” and whatever they do (Barnett 2012)’ (Basham 2016, 889). Several of the choir members I spoke to indicated that civilians often have a particular perception of the women of the choir (and, as a result, of military wives in general);

‘Theresa: I think we are perceived [as overly emotional] by the majority of civilian people who have no idea what it’s like

Emma: Who just think we sit at home crying everyday

Theresa: Because of the media coverage of ‘Wherever You Are’ and cos of the style of the song and the lyrics, and because of all the stuff we do at gigs, how sad it is how sad the lyrics are, and you know there’s a lot of ‘Oh look at those poor sad women’ [laughs]’

(Focus group extract, Theresa & Emma)

This idea of ‘oh look at those poor sad women’ embedded in the construction of the Penelope subject really touches on something important. It is not just the flat representation of the military wife that matters politically, but also the way in which the audience are implicated in this construction. We are invited to feel sorry for those ‘poor sad women’, yet always afforded the opportunity to engage in support for them. In

supporting the women of the choir, one participant told me that ‘they can feel good about themselves and feel like they are doing their bit’ (Interview extract, Emma). Thus, it is possible to argue that supporting the choir is a means through which audiences can alleviate their own guilt relating to the violence of the state and their role in supporting or not supporting the military. As Theresa said in one interview though, ‘people *want* to see tears’; there is an element of enjoyment to spectating upon and consuming the emotional military wife subject;

‘Theresa: The thing is that we do sing a lot of dreary depressing stuff

Emma: It is incredibly depressing, it is really grim... People want to see us miserable, they want to see us standing up saying “I miss my husband” they don’t want us to be happy clappy’

(Focus group extract, Theresa & Emma)

This image of the tearful military wife displays to us a particular imagination about the certain existence of a military hero, at once rendering the violence of warfare manageable through the figure of the military wife, and legitimate. That audiences *want* and *expect* to see the tearful Penelope military wife in choir performances speaks further to the dominance of these narratives in popular culture and everyday life; they are inescapable, and they are deemed necessary.

Conclusion

This paper provides a feminist analysis of the UK’s military wives choir as a vehicle for depicting the subject of the ‘Penelope’ military wife. It makes a contribution to scholarship in feminist geopolitics and on women and the military, by offering a critical engagement with the new ways in which gendered nationalisms and militarisms emerge in the context of the contemporary ‘hero-fication strategy’ (Kelly 2012). Following Enloe (1983), I have argued that the ‘political problem’ posed by the military wife is tackled in

part by the discursive labour performed by the choir. The ‘Penelope’ figure of the military wife represented by the choir is characterised by her patriotic sacrifice and feminine stoicism, and is as such deeply embedded in the gendered cultures of the militarised state, in which ‘actual men and women are expected to “take on, in cultural memory and narrative, the personas of Just Warriors and Beautiful Souls” respectively’ (Elshtain 1995, 4, cited in Basham 2016, 88). There is a level of importance assigned to the heroic subject in this narrative which transcends the realms of everyday life, remaking the military hero as an almost celestial being in which we must become personally invested; we can see this most clearly when Gareth Malone says of a choir performance that ‘Gig is the wrong word...this is a ceremony’ (*The Choir: Military Wives*, Episode 2). Indeed, the making of the ‘Penelope’ figure of the military wife in the Military Wives Choir allows the frailty of the protected state to be translated onto banal, prosaic and intimate spaces, harnessing the relationship between the family unit and the wider concerns of the nation; this is crucial to the choir’s marketing of the military wife to audiences and consumers. When we *buy into* the women of the choir by attending their performances and purchasing their merchandise, we are at the same time buying into the narrative that there is an imperative to supporting the wives of our military heroes, and that the real violence of war is felt by those who are left behind.

One of the key contributions of this paper to wider literature in feminist geopolitics is a more nuanced understanding of the violence at work in something so seemingly innocuous as a choir made up of military wives, and indeed of the different forms that this violence takes at once. On the one hand, it can be seen in the deliberate staging of the choir members’ grief in order to appeal to audience members and make sales; this violence is that of a capitalist project to profit in some way from war *no matter the cost*, a project which has clearly been successful given the commercial success of the

choir. This violence is nowhere better exemplified than in the episode of *The Choir: Military Wives* in which the women of the choir are brought out to sing to returning troops while cameramen sit on the side-lines ‘waiting for someone to cry’. These women felt deeply uncomfortable about the project which they are undertaking; ‘they made these poor people come in and listen to us sing “The Snow”, some really random Elgar choral piece and we’re like... we don’t want to be here... but they were just like THIS IS FANTASTIC LET’S GET IT ALL ON CAMERA’ (Interview extract, Theresa). At another level, there is violence enacted through the very music of the choir. This music is affectively powerful, able to impart a sense of awe and importance which cannot be adequately articulated through words alone, while the lyrics in songs such as ‘Wherever You Are’ serve to reframe the horrors of warfare as legitimate, necessary, and even heroic. The violence here, then, is that we are so easily co-opted, at a level which is scarcely perceptible, into an imagination that renders the military beyond critique.

By way of conclusion, I’d like to turn to the critical reading of Penelope provided by Margaret Atwood in *The Penelopiad*. Atwood’s Penelope is one who speaks beyond the confines of sovereign speech; she says to the reader “*Don’t follow my example, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours!*” She sheds a light on the reality of a violent representation, one which serves as ‘a stick used to beat other women with’. This paper has, in a similar way, begun to unpick the fabric of representation that the Military Wives Choir members are embedded in. And yet, there is much more work to do. What this article has shown is that there is a clear politics of recognition at work in the making of the military wife subject, and yet we cannot fully understand or appreciate the significance of this unless we delve deeper, and consider how these processes affect the lived experiences of the actual women shrouded by the Penelope wife subjectivity. As Hyde (2016, 8) tells us, ‘analyses of militarisation often remain detached from . . . the

lived experiences, social relations and embodied practices that make militarisation mobile, processual and transformative'. As such, in order to shed a more textured light on the violence of representation at play, what is needed is a much more critical and in-depth engagement with the lived experiences of women in the Military Wives Choir.

References

Atwood, Margaret. 2005. *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Barnett, Anthony. 2012. *Iron Britannia, Time to Take the Great out of Britain*. e-edition. London: Faber and Faber.

Baker, Catherine. In press. "Unsung heroism? Showbusiness and social action in Britain's military wives choir(s)". In Kitchen, Veronica and Jennifer G Mathers (eds.) *Heroism and Global Politics*. Oxon: Routledge.

Baker, Catherine, Victoria Basham, Sarah Bulmer, Harriet Gray, and Alexandra Hyde. 2016. "Encounters with the Military". *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18(1): 140-154.

Basham, Victoria. 2008. "Everyday gendered experiences of the discursive construction of civilian and military identities in Britain". *Nordic Journal of Masculinity Studies* 3(2): 150-166.

Basham, Victoria. 2016. "Gender, race, militarism and remembrance: the everyday geopolitics of the poppy". *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(6): 883-896.

Basham, Victoria and Sergio Catignani. 2018. "War is where the hearth is: gendered labour and the

everyday reproduction of the geopolitical in the army reserves”. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20(2): 153-171.

Butler, Judith. 2008. “Sexual politics, torture, and secular time”. *British Journal of Sociology* 59(1): 1-23.

Closs Stephens, Angharad. 2016. “The affective atmospheres of nationalism”. *Cultural Geographies* 23(2): 181-198

Closs Stephens, Angharad. 2009. “Walter Benjamin”. P77-88 in Edkins, Jenny and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds.) *Critical Theory and International Relations*. Oxon: Routledge.

Connolly, William. 2008. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. London: Duke.

Dowler, Lorraine, and Jo Sharp. 2001. “A feminist geopolitics?” *Space & Polity* 5(3): 165-176.

Duffy, Carol Ann. 2015[1999] *The World's Wife*. London: Pan Macmillan.

Dyvik, Synne. 2014. “Women as ‘Practitioners’ and ‘Targets’: Gender and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16(3): 410-429.

Edkins, Jenny. 2011. *Missing: Persons and Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 1995. *Women and war*. University of Chicago Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 1983. *Does khaki become you? The militarisation of women's lives*. London: Pluto.

Enloe, Cynthia. 1990. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. London: University of California Press.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Fluri, Jennifer. 2009. "Geopolitics of gender and violence 'from below'". *Political Geography* 28(4): 259-265.
- Fluri, Jennifer. 2011. "Bodies, bombs, and barricades: Geographies of conflict and civilian (in)security. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36(2): 280-296.
- Gilmartin, Mary, and Eleonore Kofman. 2004. "Critically feminist geopolitics". P113-126 in Staeheli, Lynn, Eleonore Kofman, and Linda Peake (eds.) *Mapping Women, Making Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Goldstein, Joshua. 2001. *War and gender: How gender shapes the war system and vice versa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Henry, Marsha, and Katherine Natanel. 2016. "Militarisation as diffusion: the politics of gender, space and the everyday". *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(6): 850-856.
- Hooper, Charlotte. 2012. *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations, and Gender Politics*. Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Horn, Denise. 2010. "Boots and Bedsheets: Constructing the Military Support System in a Time of War". P57-68 in Sjoberg, Laura and Sandra Via (eds.) *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives*. Oxford: Praeger.
- Hyde, Alexandra. 2017. "The Civilian Wives of Military Personnel: Mobile Subjects or Agents of Militarism?" p195-210 in Woodward, Rachel and Claire Duncanson (eds.) *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*. London: Palgrave.
- Hyde, Alexandra. 2016. "The present tense of Afghanistan: accounting for space, time and gender in processes of militarisation". *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(6): 857-868.
- Hyndman, Jennifer. 2004. "Mind the gap: Bridging feminist and political geography through geopolitics. *Political Geography* 23(3): 307-322.
- Hyndman, Jennifer. 2007. "Feminist geopolitics revisited: Body counts in Iraq. *Professional Geographer* 59(1): 35-46.

- Jenkins, k. Neil, Nick Megoran, Rachel Woodward, and Daniel Bos. 2012. "Wootton Bassett and the political spaces of remembrance and mourning". *Area* 44(3): 356-363.
- Jervis, Sue. 2011. *Relocation, Gender and Emotion: A Psycho-Social Perspective on the Experiences of Military Wives*. London: Karnac.
- Kear, Adrian. 2013. "Traces of Presence". P17-39 in Edkins, Jenny and Adrian Kear (eds.) *International Politics of Performance: Critical Aesthetics and Creative Practice*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Kelly, John. 2012. "Popular Culture, Sport and the 'Hero'-fication of British Militarism". *Sociology* 47(4): 722-738.
- King, Anthony. 2017. Gender and Close Combat Roles. P.305-317 in Woodward, Rachel and Claire Duncanson (eds.) *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*. London: Palgrave.
- Lawrence, Karen. 1994. *Penelope Voyages: Women and travel in the British literary tradition*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- Lowe, Philip, Jonathan Murdoch, and Graham Cox. 1995. "A civilized retreat? Anti-urbanism, rurality and the making of an anglo-centric culture". P63-82 in Healy, Patsy, Stuart Cameron, S. Davoudi, Steve Graham, and Ali Madani-Pour (eds.) *Managing Cities: The New Urban Context*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- M&Co. 2018. Military Wives Choir Merchandise. <https://www.mandco.com/military-wives-choirs/>. Last accessed 18/12/18.
- MacKenzie, Megan. 2015. *Beyond the band of brothers: The US military and the myth that women can't fight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayer, Tamar. 2000. *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. London: Routledge.

Mayer, Tamar. 2004. "Embodied nationalisms". P152-168 in Staeheli, Lynn, Eleonore Kofman, and Linda Peake (eds.) *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*. New York: Routledge.

Military Wives Choir Foundation. 2016. "How we Started". <http://www.militarywiveschoirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Howwe-started.pdf>.

Last accessed 11/11/17.

Military Wives Choir Foundation. 2018. About Us. <http://www.militarywiveschoirs.org/top/about-us/>. Last accessed 03/10/18.

Murnaghan, Sheila. 1994. "Reading Penelope." P.76-96 in Oberhelmaan, Steven M, Van Kelly and Richard J Golsan (eds). *Epic and Epoch: Essays on the Interpretation and History of a Genre*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press.

Roderick, Ian. 2009. "Bare life of the virtuous shadow warrior: the use of silhouette in military training advertisements". *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23 (1): 77–91.

Sharp, Jo. 1996. "A feminist engagement with national identity". P97-108 in Duncan, Nancy (ed.) *Bodyspace: Destabilising geographies of gender and sexuality*. London: Routledge.

SSAFA. 2018. Military Wives Choir Foundation. <https://www.ssafa.org.uk/about-us/working-partnership/military-wives-choirs-foundation>. Last accessed 18/12/18.

Stronger Together. 2017. "Songs of courage, hope and friendship". <http://www.stronger-together.co.uk/2017>. Last accessed 11/11/17.

Tidy, Joanna. 2015. "Forces Sauces and Eggs for Soldiers: food, nostalgia, and the rehabilitation of the British military". *Critical Military Studies* 1(3): 220-232.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2004. "Gender, the Nationalist Imagination, War, and Peace." In Hyndman, Jennifer and Wenona Giles (eds.) *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*. London: University of California Press.

Via, Sandra. 2010. "Gender, Militarism, and Globalization: Soldiers for Hire and Hegemonic Masculinity". P42-56 in Sjoberg, Laura and Sandra Via (eds.) *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives*. Oxford: Praeger.

Woodward, Rachel and Trish Winter. 2007. *Sexing the soldier: the politics of gender and the contemporary British Army*. London: Routledge.

Woodward, Rachel, Trish Winter, and K.Neil Jenkins. 2009. "Heroic anxieties: the figure of the British soldier in contemporary print media". *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 2(2): 211-223.

Woodward, Rachel. 1998. "'It's a man's life!': Soldiers, masculinity and the countryside". *Gender, Place and Culture* 5(3): 277-300

Woodward, Rachel. 2003. "Locating Military Masculinities: Space, Place, and the Formation of Gender Identity in the British Army". P43-56 in Higate, Paul (ed.) *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*. Westport CT: Praeger.

Woodward, Rachel and Claire Duncanson. 2017. *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*. London: Palgrave.

Woodward, Rachel and K.Neil Jenkins. 2012. "Military memoirs, their covers and the reproduction of public narratives of war". *Journal of War & Culture Studies* 5(3): 349-369.