


# THREE WOMEN ON THREE FRONTS: THE FEMININE EXPERIENCE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS REFLECTED IN WAR JOURNALS AND LETTERS

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to provide a close reading of two illustrative texts for the feminine version of the war diary during WWI in the Romanian territory, namely Yvonne Blondel's *War Journal: 1916-1917* and Queen Marie's unabridged version of the diary she kept between 1916 and 1918. The contrastive element is represented by Sextil Puşcariu's *Memoirs*, which are relevant from a threefold perspective: gender, geography, and the representation of the feminine figure. The article will focus on six feminine roles: the nurse, the patriot, the diplomat, the wife, the mother, and the writer.

Keywords: Queen Marie of Romania, Yvonne Blondel, Leonora Puşcariu, war journal, First World War, women's roles

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## INTRODUCTION

From 2014 to 2018, as well as shortly before or afterwards, the centenary of the First World War gave rise to an affluence of publications attempting to offer new perspectives on this major cataclysm of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This affluence was due to the extensive archival material that has become available in the last one hundred years and to the changes that the society has undergone at all levels since then. One of these trends was the reconsideration of the role that women played during this global conflagration and the way in which their status changed in its aftermath. One of the early attempts to retrieve testimonies that "relate the war as an essentially female experience" (Cardinal, Goldman & Hattaway, 2004, p. 4) took the form of an anthology of women's writings from the United States, Britain and Europe which was intended to challenge the notion of war shaped by a war literature arising mainly out of men's experiences in the trenches. In contrast, women's war literature developed its own "stock of motifs" (Cardinal, Goldman & Hattaway, 2004, p. 6), reflecting "the way in which most women actually experienced the war, in roles which allowed them an acuity of observation which was inseparable from the powerlessness of the onlooker confined to the edge of the conflict" (Cardinal, Goldman & Hattaway, 2004, p. 7). One of these key roles was that of nurse, which

often went hand in hand with the role of diarist. Consequently, a significant part of women's war literature is represented by the immediate accounts of those who came into closest contact with the actuality of men's war (Hallett, 2016; Powell, 2016).

This trend was also manifest in the Romanian historiography, in which it took mainly two forms: the publication of feminine autobiographical writings on the one hand, and the studies dedicated specifically to women's activity throughout the war on the other. A notable example in the first category is the *War Journal* of Queen Marie of Romania – the unabridged version of the diary that she kept during the war, published in three volumes and covering the period from 1916 to 1918. The anthologies of private or official documents retrieved from a variety of archival sources also contain important chapters regarding women's activity during the war. For instance, *Viața pe front în scrieri personale [Frontline Accounts in Private Writings]* (Negru, 2019) includes a consistent section dedicated to the women's resistance in the capital city of Bucharest during the German occupation; such accounts represent useful complements to the queen's diaries, providing other perspectives on the same events. The second category of publications includes two important volumes published in the context of the centenary, namely *Eroinele României Mari: destine din linia întâi [The Heroines of Greater Romania: First Line Destinies]* (Berciu-Drăghicescu, 2018) and *Bătălia lor. Femeile din România în Primul Război Mondial [Their Battle. Women in Romania during the First World War]* (Ciupală, 2017). The first is an ample enterprise to provide biographical portraits of numerous Romanian women that distinguished themselves throughout the war, while the second one is an extended analysis of some major roles that women performed during this conflagration (such as the fighters, the queen or the heroine).

As the previous examples show, such recent pursuits have been predominantly restitutive, either in the form of anthologies or of biographies. This article proposes a follow-up approach consisting in the detailed analysis of some of the specific motifs of feminine war literature that these publications have made accessible. Some steps have already been taken in this direction (Hallett, 2016; Ciupală, 2017) and this paper aims to initiate a similar in-depth analysis of a selection of texts reflecting the war experience in the three major regions of the future Greater Romania.

This article is based on three main texts: the previously mentioned journal of Queen Marie, the war journal of Yvonne Blondel, published in 2005, and Sextil Pușcariu's memoirs, published in 1978. The first reason for this choice is the geographical perspective of the account: Queen Marie recounts the events in Bucharest and later on in Iași, Yvonne Blondel is a direct witness to the events on the southern front of Romania, from Siliștra to Galați, while Sextil Pușcariu provides an ample view on the events in Transylvania. Together, they enable the reader to perceive the complementary reflection of similar experiences in all the Romanian regions. Secondly, the three autobiographical writings illustrate three contemporary, yet distinct, feminine hypostases at the time: Marie, Queen of Romania, a pivotal figure in the course of the war although outside the official sphere of political decisions; Yvonne, daughter of Camille Blondel, Minister of France in Romania and one of the main actors in Romania's decision to sign the convention that would make it the ally of France; and Leonora Pușcariu, the discreet wife of the reputed linguist Sextil Pușcariu, who became the first Rector of the Romanian University of Cluj in 1919 and was also an important representative of Greater Romania at the League of Nations in the interwar years.

The choice is not entirely symmetrical, yet the lack of symmetry is significant in itself. In this trio, Leonora Pușcariu stands apart due to the fact that she did not keep a diary of her own and all the information that is passed on about her is filtered through the perspective of her husband's

writing. However, his *Memoirs*, which were put together after her death and another World War, are in fact a monument to her memory and create a vivid picture of the central part she played in their circle throughout the war and afterwards. At her wish, the letters she wrote to her husband almost daily during the war were destroyed and the *Memoirs* quote only the letters that he sent her at the time. In contrast to this act of self-obliteration, Queen Marie and Yvonne Blondel kept rigorous records of their daily activities even though these were often so burdensome that they could have hindered any writing activity.

The impact of these writings differs greatly. The publication of Queen Marie's three-volume *War Journal* in 2014-2015 indicates a revival of the "feminine myth" that she had created for herself by the end of the First World War yet started to decline even in her lifetime to be entirely effaced during the communist period (Bizomescu, 1995, pp. 191, 196-197; Ciupală, 2017, pp. 276-277). An extensive chapter, which offers a detailed analysis of her journal, is dedicated to her in Alin Ciupală's book. On the other hand, Yvonne Blondel's diary is quoted mainly as a documentary source both in this volume and in *The Heroines of Greater Romania*, while Sextil Pușcariu's *Memoirs* have been hardly examined in the context of this topic. Consequently, the less explored texts and motifs will be given greater prominence in the course of the analysis than the ones that have already formed the object of numerous and ample readings.

Therefore, this article aims to provide a closer reading of the three texts from the perspective of several major roles that women fulfilled throughout the war. More specifically, in Queen Marie's case, this new reading will entail a slight shift in the interpretation of her actions and of her part in the contemporary events; concerning Yvonne Blondel, the aim is to highlight the moral transformation that she underwent as a result of her constant immersion in the most gruesome outcomes of war; through Leonora Pușcariu, the article aims to bring to the fore a different form of feminine behaviour characteristic of the age, which is both self-effacing and overlooked by the current approaches to the subject.

## METHODOLOGY

As the article relies on a detailed and comparative analysis of the three diaristic sources, one must also address in advance the issue of secondary and late interventions in the text. As previously stated, the publication of Queen Marie's journal was motivated by the possibility of the integral restitution of her daily notes, which had been subjected to a drastic process of selection in her memoirs – *The Story of My Life* – published during her lifetime (1934-1935); the memoirs "attenuate or eliminate precisely the most sincere impressions – and sometimes outbursts – of the queen, which obviously could not have been made public" (Boia, 2014, p. 6). Although the manuscript bears the marks of later readings, the instances in which the text was altered are rather rare. Usually, the censorship is exercised before writing not afterwards. It is only towards the end of the second volume, when she records the tribulations that accompanied the Romanian government's decision to sign the peace treaty with the Central Powers, that she is overwhelmed by revolt and writes down a number of lines that are blotted out at a later date (as the translator points out). Apart from these, the author does not refrain from recording sensitive opinions or actions, especially if they have formed the object of previous discussions, be they more or less private.

It is known that the manuscript of Yvonne Blondel's published text was a transcript of the original journal and it is supposed that she may have made some alterations in the process.

However, an introductory note states that she has not changed the content so as to conserve its “exact savour” (Blondel, 2005, p. 34)<sup>1</sup> and thus be able to relive that particular “page” in her life.

Despite their title, Sextil Pușcariu’s *Memoirs* hardly ever contain reminiscences of distant episodes in his life. The author mainly edits a large collection of autobiographical documents such as diaries, letters, articles, reports, etc. His recollection of the First World War is an ingenious interspersed of the diary he kept at the time and the letters he sent home.

Thus, all the three texts retain the quality of immediacy in relation to the events, allowing the reader to perceive the instant reactions without any foresight and to measure the conceptual distance that all these characters get to cover by the end of the war. Although the article will focus on the subtleties of individual experiences, some general conclusions regarding women’s lot in this debacle can be inferred from these singular examples.

The article will approach each individual biography from the point of view of six major roles that stand out in these texts: the nurse, the patriot, the diplomat, the wife, the mother, and the writer.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Nurse

Yvonne Blondel’s<sup>2</sup> experience of the war in the role of a nurse is one of the most remarkable ones. The outbreak of the war found her in Silistra, where her husband had been appointed prefect. In this capacity, she organised her first hospital at the prefecture and also in a place that she had humorously called “Rogojina Palace”, a former improvised hotel for her guests that took its name from the typically Romanian rugs that decorated its floors. After the fall of Tutrakan and the evacuation of Silistra, she chose to work in the proximity of the first lines of the southern front, at Medgidia, Brăila and Galați, witnessing every stage of the retreat of the Romanian army until it reached the borders of Moldavia. Apart from the personal account of the external events, what is interesting to follow is the inner changes that they provoke resulting in the reconsideration of her own role as a woman in this unforeseen world.

The first element is the progressive realisation and habituation to the actual meaning of disappearance and death and the revelation that war is “a terrible thing” (Blondel, 2005, p. 53) despite the great cause that animates the participants. The idea begins to transpire as early as the first days of combat, when the reported absence of two officers and two hundred soldiers causes her a previously unknown restlessness and lessens the initial patriotic exaltation and hope. At a later point, she even wonders whether this carnage could be the actual means of ensuring the happiness of the people in the Romanian provinces (Blondel, 2005, p. 161). By the time she is about to leave Medgidia, she notes that the war has one more occupation to teach her (Blondel, 2005, p. 278), namely that of undertaker. While the railway station is being bombed, Yvonne and one of her assistants are digging a grave in the garden of the station master

<sup>1</sup> All the subsequent quotations from Yvonne Blondel’s diary and Sextil Pușcariu’s memoirs were translated by the author of this article.

<sup>2</sup> A biographical note including details about her life before and after the war is available in the volume *Eroinele României Mari: destine din linia întâi* [The Heroines of Greater Romania: First Line Destinies] (Drăghicescu, 2018, pp. 273-274). See also the article dedicated to her in *Enciclopedia României* [The Encyclopedia of Romania] (Anonymous, 2011).

so as to fulfil the last wish of an officer who was afraid that his body would be desecrated after death. In fact, it is not only this occupation that she learns on the front. At the start of the war, she has little training as a nurse and the experience she and her team gain is the result of their increasing struggle to meet the needs of the wounded or the ill (Blondel, 2005, p. 225).

The second element of this inner transformation is an increased feeling of responsibility that prevents her from remaining in a safe place for a long time and constantly urges her to seek a new cause to devote herself to. Thus, after leaving Silistra and returning to Bucharest, she does not stay long in her elegant and comfortable home, nor does she volunteer to work in one of the well-provided hospitals of the capital city but moves her hospital close to the first lines. She is quick at identifying problems and looking for solutions. Thus, she organises two shelters in the vicinity of the railway station, looks for transportation for the wounded coming from the front, offers spiritual comfort, in the form of an improvised altar, to those who pass through her shelters, carefully collects and stores the belongings of the departed in view of sending them to their families, ensures that the people affected by cholera are properly treated and even saves two Russian soldiers left behind in the rush of the evacuation, visits the Romanian, Russian and Serbian soldiers in their trenches bringing them small gifts; she does not forget even the population of abandoned cats and dogs, which she feeds with the remains from the mess hall.

Due to her feeling of duty towards the people in her care and towards the wounded that show up in great waves at the very last minute, she is among the last to leave the cities that are to fall in the hands of the enemy. On her way to Iași, she is involved in the horrible train accident at Ciurea. After miraculously escaping from the train, she immediately joins a group of people looking for survivors. Once in Iași, she soon accepts Queen Marie's proposal to assume a new difficult task as a nurse in the hospital for the people suffering from exanthematic typhus in the room for the moribund. After leaving this hospital, she soon gets involved in a new project – a shelter for the numerous mutilated soldiers that wander about in the streets of the overcrowded city without being received anywhere. To this end, she asks for the requisition of a museum, granted by King Ferdinand I but highly criticised by Nicolae Iorga. It is the last episode of her journal, which ends abruptly soon after this account.<sup>3</sup>

All of these actions indicate a major change of perspective that the war operated in only a few days. A radical breach appears between her former life and the new one, a breach that obliges her to reconsider entirely her role as a woman. She finds it impossible to return to her previous life, filled with fashionable and fun activities, such as parties, car racing, tennis, flying records, and occasional charities, a life which she used to consider "interesting and well spent" (Blondel, 2005, p. 105). She concludes that

"[w]e have played the role of elegant ladies long enough. This is the time to show that beneath our elegance, uselessness, and taste for pleasures, there is something more profound and valuable" (Blondel, 2005, p. 113).

This particular vision is the result of her direct experience of war in the city of Silistra, an experience which she finds impossible to communicate to her group of friends in the capital city. Even among the fellow nurses, she forms a separate figure. The harsh work in the proximity of the front line makes her conjure a different image of the nurse than the angelic figure in white veils floating in a clean hospital, namely a Cinderella-like nurse working in rudimentary and

<sup>3</sup> Some information on her future actions can be gleaned from Queen Marie's diary. She left the city in order to take charge of a field hospital and of a canteen for children in Frunzeasca, under the patronage of the Queen. During this time, she was also gravely ill, which may also be an explanation for the sudden discontinuation of the diary.

muddy shelters striving to evacuate as many of the wounded as possible (Blondel, 2005, p. 241), yet completely content with her choice as she feels useful and efficient.

Among the numerous instances that provide an insight into the common perception of women and their roles at the time, two singular episodes are particularly illustrative of the stereotypes that were manifest at all levels of society and education. The first is represented by the arrival of a Scottish team of forty-five women led by Dr. MacIntire, formerly a surgeon in a hospital in Glasgow. Yvonne Blondel records with irony the disappointment that the officers, particularly the Romanians, show regarding the looks of the brave and selfless Scottish women. She also shows indignation with her compatriot, Robert De Flers, who launches into a series of jokes at their expense. Although she herself belongs to the category of mondain women and occasionally admits to allowing her coquettish spirit to resurface in her daily interactions at the mess hall, her own revelation of a rearrangement of values, in which beauty becomes secondary in relation to resilience, energy and goodwill, makes her take a stand that ultimately has no effect on her interlocutors.

The second episode takes place during one of her visits to the trenches. On her way back, she picks up in her car seven of the wounded soldiers that usually had to walk to the city, not before passing the wheel to her driver

“so as not to increase the pains of my fellow travellers through the fear they would certainly have felt if they had seen a woman driving the car” (Blondel, 2005, p. 225).

Her casual remark may contain a trace of irony but at the same time it is more likely to be a genuine expression of compassion and concern considering that most of these combatants, as she notes elsewhere, are simple peasants brought here directly from behind their ploughs and for whose power of endurance she manifests the greatest respect. In fact, throughout her journal, her own car becomes an emblem of the change that she herself has undergone: instead of a fashionable accessory and a sign of emancipation, the car is now the useful means of transporting the wounded, of dealing with emergencies or of making one’s escape only after ensuring a safe journey for the vulnerable.

Her valiant behaviour earned her the Cross of Saint George that she received from the Russian representatives. Exceptionally, King Ferdinand I also awarded her a decoration that was usually given to men for her assistance in the most desperate situations (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015, pp. 103-104).

Most of the photographs taken of Queen Marie during the war picture her in the white uniform of the Red Cross. Her constant presence among the wounded or the ill throughout the war was one of the actions that earned her the devotion of the Romanian people and the symbolic status of “Mother of the Wounded”. Visiting the hospitals on a regular basis was one of the main tasks she set for herself for the duration of the war. Such visits customarily consisted in walking among the patients and distributing small gifts and kind words. These regular visits frequently took hours on end during which she stopped by the bedside of hundreds of patients and listened to any grievances the people wanted to share. She visited large and well-provided hospitals, small and poor hospitals, hospitals for the wounded as well as hospitals for infectious diseases, city hospitals or field hospitals. On the one hand, these visits served to lift the morale of the patients and of the staff, on the other – they allowed her to identify their wants and needs and to provide help accordingly. The close encounter with the realities of the war, whose terrible consequences were more visible in hospitals than on the battlefield, made her draw the same conclusion as all those who saw its most devastating effects on the human frame. Faced with the gravest cases,

she was struck by the full madness and purposelessness of the war and, on a more personal note, felt ashamed to give in to the fatigue that such prolonged visits entailed.

Unlike commemorative writings, which highlight the contributions of various individuals or groups to a specific cause but tend to downplay the shortcomings that taint their actions, the autobiographical writings may sometimes provide a more authentic, although less idealised perspective on the events, especially if the same facts are independently corroborated by other contemporary accounts. This is also the case of Queen Marie's diary, in which she makes note not only of the admirable dedication of the medical personnel but also of personal or institutional rivalries and selfish interests. For instance, she is made aware of the competition that her own society represents for the Romanian Red Cross and of the fact that the first usurped some of the rights of the latter. She also mentions the conflicts that occurred among the members of the medical staff, which undermined the operational capacity of the institution. At the same time, she admits that the success of her society is attributable not only to her total dedication but also to a strategy of bypassing certain administrative restrictions. She is also aware that her assistants sometimes take advantage of their status. Nevertheless, she considers that her role as a queen is to dissipate such misunderstandings and establish a just path among contradictory influences and ambitions. Although the work of the "Queen Marie" Society contributes to the consolidation of her popularity among the people and the army, she dismisses the idea that she has other personal ambitions than that of gaining the affection of her people (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, pp. 103-104). This aspect is confirmed by the trust and appreciation that the Allies showed her. The American mission worked directly with her and, on their departure, left her in full charge of all the goods they brought with them. The French awarded her the prestigious *Médaille des Épidémies*.

#### The Patriot

Among the three women who are portrayed in this article, two of them were not of Romanian nationality. Queen Marie's ancestors – British, Russian and German – were represented on both sides of the confronting powers. Yvonne Blondel was French, but Romania became her adoptive country when her father was appointed minister. From this perspective, it is particularly interesting to follow their individual manifestations of patriotism.

During the nine years that she spent in Romania, Yvonne Blondel came to regard this country as her second homeland, which is why, on the very day when Romania entered the war, she wrote the following:

"In my soul I feel so profoundly Romanian that I sense all the tremor of my adoptive country" (Blondel, 2005, p. 39).

However, it was her native country that set the example for her future actions. When she decided to become a nurse, she actually followed the example of her family members in Loiret, who had been offering their share of sacrifice in the war for two years: the men were on the front while the women were tending to patients in various hospitals they had set up.

Yvonne Blondel's diary is filled with sharp and even humorous characterological observations regarding different nations with whom she gets to interact closely on the southern front: Romanians, Russians, Serbians, Roma, Bulgarians, Germans, Turks and even French. Nevertheless, the events she witnesses set in motion an individual process of moral reasoning at the end of which she feels compelled to make abstraction both of national affiliations and of battle sides. Thus, the series of evacuations she is caught in make her aware of "the vague

instinct that certain things simply cannot be done” (Blondel, 2005, p. 242), such as leaving behind the people in her care even if the threat is imminent. An authentic ally, she cannot but wonder what the Romanians and Russians would say if she were to leave her post before the decisive result of the battles (Blondel, 2005, p. 242). The same instinct is shown when she makes a casual remark on the Russians’ apparent tendency to give way rather easily in front of the opposing armies:

“Ultimately, it was not their land that was devastated and trampled on. Frankly, neither was it ours, but our Latin affinities became manifest under the circumstances” (Blondel, 2005, p. 246).

This circumstantial comment revealing her primordial connections has no effect on her actions as the moral imperative consistently takes precedence over national considerations. It is the same sense of moral duty that makes her offer her services as a nurse to those in need irrespective of their national appurtenance. Thus, on one occasion when she is provoked to express her creed, she declares that her duty as a nurse is “to bandage those human beings without distinction of race and religion” (Blondel, 2005, p. 195) and consequently proceeds to dress the wounds of a group of Bulgarian prisoners whom both her team and the other patients treat with hostility due to the reputed savagery of their compatriots. This diary is kept throughout a period when the Romanian Army is in continuous retreat and the relocations of her hospital actually mirror this regressive movement. It is in this context that she most beautifully expresses the faith that inspires her actions:

“What gives me strength, in spite of everything, is my deep and absolute conviction that my two homelands, which endlessly yield honour just as the flowers yield their perfumed fruits, will rise victorious and ennobled out of these misfortunes” (Blondel, 2005, p. 259).

A similar faith, formulated in almost similar terms, is recurrently expressed in Sextil Pușcariu’s *Memoirs*:

“The widespread hope that the war will soon be over slowly turns into a personal belief that the horrible massacre has to continue and cannot come to an end, irrespective of the sacrifices, before the fruit ripens” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 34) and a great good comes out of this.

What distinguishes his own experience of the war is the prevailing feeling that, in his capacity of an officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, he is bound to act in accordance with a different will than his own and to endure a long deprivation of the two things that give meaning to his existence – his family and his studies:

“What makes the war so overbearing is the nerve strain and the loneliness, the separation from the loved ones, the awareness that you are wasting your youth and that you are only an insignificant bolt which has to work without being able to do anything outside its purpose” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 109).

In other words, he perceives the war as “a period of stagnation, when we have been reduced to the role of machines” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 248). The letters he and Leonora Pușcariu write to each other daily, the periods of leave that he spends with his wife and his two children, the time spent in reminiscing about these moments or other happy occasions from a more distant past, the contemplation of future possibilities that the end of the war may bring are all effective means of escaping the dreariness of this state of passivity. The absence of Leonora’s letters prevents the reader from getting a direct insight into her own feelings, but one may surmise from her husband’s letters that she shared his view.

This period of stagnation comes to an end when Sextil Pușcariu is discharged from his military duties and allowed to return home to Chernivtsi, where he continues his work as a professor at the university. It is at this point that Sextil Pușcariu gets involved in the national movement that



concludes with the Union of Bukovina with Romania in November 1918. This action could not have been undertaken without exposing himself and his family to great risks. When he consults his wife on the best course of action, her answer reveals an equal determination to bring their contribution to a national cause:

“If, for four years, you had to be ready to give your life for a cause that was not ours, now, when the fate of your nation is at stake, you cannot hesitate” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 320).

In her case, the patriotic feeling is as discreet as her entire existence but no less effective than the grand actions of better-positioned people. It is this simple yet decided answer that enables her husband to become one of the main initiators of the Union both in Bukovina and in Transylvania.

There are numerous instances in which Queen Marie professes her profound love for her country and for its people to the extent that she comes to see her fate as indistinguishable from the fate of Romania (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 289). This view was the result of twenty-five years spent in learning to understand the national character and the expectations that the nation had of her. The charitable actions in which she gets involved throughout the war bring her in close and repeated contact with the entire scale of the social hierarchy and with all the categories of people formed by the war: the wounded, the cripple, the orphans, the refugees and so on. Her efforts to meet the needs of these destitute people make her statement far from abstract or gratuitous. But her patriotism is also manifest in her relations with the Allies as well as within her family circle, which is why a closer look at these aspects will reveal the nuances of her attachment to her country.

#### The Diplomat

Among the three women, Queen Marie is the only one in a position to play this role. It is not a part she chooses for herself (Queen Marie of Romania, 2014, p. 265) but one that results from the circumstances she finds herself in. She gets involved in military decisions (the appointment of General Prezan), sanitary decisions (the appointment of Ioan Cantacuzino) or political decisions (Queen Marie of Romania, 2014, p. 298), but her most significant part is the one she plays in relation with the Allies, particularly at the crucial moment when Russia is about to reach an agreement with Germany, and later on, when Romania is forced to start the peace negotiations with the latter.

At such critical moments, the Queen’s off-stage interventions as revealed by the diary are anything but diplomatic. She launches herself into passionate tirades in which she states the barren truth without the rhetorical flourish that a public meeting would impose. During the discussions with her compatriots, such as General Ballard (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 294), she does not hesitate to denounce the wavering attitude of Romania’s allies, who seem to wish to go back on their initial promises once the country no longer presents a strategic interest. Her outburst proves to be efficient as she receives assurances that the claims of her adoptive country will be supported by her country of birth (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, pp. 315, 460). She manifests the same frankness in the discussions with the representative of France – Count St. Aulaire (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 377). The more hopeless Romania’s situation becomes, the more trenchant the Queen’s statements are, to the extent that she has the impression of turning into a “monster of truth passing through the flames” (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015b, p. 107). Although she has harsh words with reference to the attitude of the Allies (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 374), she completely opposes the idea of the peace

treaty with Germany, going to the extremes to prevent it in order to protect her country from destruction and to preserve its honour for the future generations (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 466).

Despite the proven affection for the nation she is ruling, its people are not spared the harsh criticism of the Queen (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015b, pp. 51-53) when the unsuccess of the campaign makes them lose faith in their leaders. She is hurt by their lack of enduring loyalty and by the ease with which some are willing to dispose of the current dynasty. Such traits are in complete contrast with her British tenacity and refusal to give up when faced with adversities. Despite such disappointments, she feels that this people is fundamentally good and only regrets that she may be robbed of the possibility of doing them a great good.

Although her actions against the peace treaty are unsuccessful, her efforts do not go unacknowledged. For instance, General Berthelot awards the "Queen Marie" Society the "Croix de Guerre" in recognition of the Queen's loyalty as an ally (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 425). Later on, she herself is awarded the same medal (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015b, p. 391). King George V promises to support the Romanian cause. General Văitoianu informs her that the Romanian Army appreciates her struggle for the "National Ideal" (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 460). The foreign missions leave the country with a positive impression of her as an ally, a fact which will carry a great importance at the Paris Conference at the end of the war.

#### The Wife

It is in this role that Leonora Pușcariu stands out among the others, particularly since her actions are presented from the point of view of their recipient – her husband. At the start of the war and in the years that follow, he frequently meditates on the aspects that make his life meaningful. As he notes on several occasions, his family life is the core of his happiness and power of endurance:

"I realised that I had lived a happy life. I had everything a man can wish. (...) Then I had the happiness of marrying a loving, kind, honest, devoted woman, whom I loved from the bottom of my heart and who gave me the sweetest of children. I achieved all my ambitions early. From that point on, the war no longer seemed so terrible. The inner revolt subsided and was replaced by the hope that a great good will come out for the Romanian people. And slowly this hope became the creed of my life, which got me through many difficult moments" (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 9).

Paradoxically, the onset of the war contributes to the consolidation of the couple's already steadfast relationship. The conversation they have on the eve of his imminent departure to the front is a moment of absolute honesty that renders explicit what each means to the other:

"ten years after our marriage – we felt that our union became so strong that neither death could put an end to it, not life could increase it" (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 23).

At the same time, the war disrupts their perfect familial microcosm and imposes an indefinite separation. For the duration of the war, the family's efforts are concentrated on obliterating the distance through short periods of reunion, during Sextil Pușcariu's leaves, through reliving the happy moments over and over again or through the anticipation of such moments. There are numerous instances of such attempts to compensate for the short time spent together in real life by recollecting it in imagination, thus minimising the amount of time spent apart:

"Meanwhile, separated from each other, Leonora and Sextil were strolling in their charming microcosm, reviving cherished memories and making plans for the future" (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 226);  
 "In my memory, the situations, spoken words, gestures, jokes, caresses succeed one another like

a string of shiny pearls” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 57); “Now that I have spent a few days with you, I know what you do at every hour of the day and I often find myself watching every one of your movements” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 114); “these days were so beautiful, so meaningful and the hope that they will be repeated in two months’ time gave me the strength to bear the horrors of the war” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 216).

The daily letters are a means of continuing their usual life as normally as possible:

“Even if we are far from each other, we are not separated and continue our family life with all its cares and joys. In our daily letters we bid each other ‘good morning’ and ‘good evening’ as if we were together and we write our thoughts and hopes as if we were sitting very close to each other. (...) We have no doubts about the source of happiness because we have found ours. We only need to strive to keep it unharmed. This war has taught us to cherish it more, precisely because it forced us apart. (...) To me, happiness is not a chimera, it is my dark Pisa and my sweet kids, so it is something I can take and hold into my arms” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 227).

The time they spend apart recollecting various moments of their ten-year marriage allows them to become more aware of each other’s character and of the way in which their personalities completed and modelled one another. In Sextil Pușcariu’s case, the catalyst of such meditations is the literature that he reads extensively on the front. Very often, the characters’ lives and opinions serve as terms of comparison for his own thoughts and feelings. For instance, on one occasion, he writes to his wife about a series of short stories in which he recognises some of their own weaknesses. On his part, it is the tendency to get involved in too many projects, a tendency which his wife wisely knows when to check. On her part, it is an inclination to worry too much about the daily trifles, for which the antidote is a healthy dose of humour that his optimist spirit readily provides (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 138). But the comparisons are mostly to her advantage making him more appreciative of her qualities and deepening the affection he has for her:

“every time I happen to compare you with others, you rise so much above them. You may say that I am blinded by love. To a certain extent, my judgement may be influenced by the great affection that I bear you, but this love increases precisely because I know your great qualities” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 186).

The state of peaceful happiness altered by the war and to which they hope to return at the end of it involves a clear division of traditionally assigned roles, which are voluntarily and gladly assumed by both sides:

“Concerning us, I don’t wish for any changes. My only wish is that we enjoy the same tranquil life we’ve had so far and that we both accomplish our life’s work peacefully and with all our strength: you – raising the children and maintaining the regular tick-tock of the clock, I – your protection and my scientific work” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 136).

In this particular family circle, these conventional roles do not establish a hierarchical relation between the partners but one of collaboration and mutual support. While on the front, the linguist attempts to pursue his philological preoccupations and thus comes to realise

“the immense difference between the way I work at home as opposed to here. There, I enjoy complete tranquillity and the working hours are working hours, when no one disturbs me and I can fully concentrate. Who am I to thank for this? My cherished Pisa, who relieves me of all the small cares of daily life, which take up so much of one’s time and use up one’s energy. Do not imagine, my dear one, that I am not aware of this. And not only do you take these small cares upon yourself and I find everything ready, prepared by my darling’s hands, but once I cross the threshold of my study, I find the happiness and peace of mind that help me keep my inner balance and serenity, which are so necessary when you work as a scientist” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 111).

Consequently, the wife is regarded not as an adjuvant but as “the main collaborator of my works” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 111), almost a co-author. The promise to dedicate the finished work to her also serves as incentive to pursue it despite the occasional obstacles. In fact, the first part of the *Memoirs* – “The War of 1914-1918” – is also dedicated to her: “To Leonora I dedicate this book whose pages sometimes speak more of her than of war” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 3). Ultimately, her life’s work is to enable her husband to accomplish his written work, which is, in turn, a monument to her.

It is also in the *Memoirs* that he makes plain an aspect which his public life may have obscured, namely that in his set of values the family comes before his career. Thus, when he is informed that he is unlikely to be able to recover his possessions left in Chernivtsi, including the manuscripts that summed up his fifteen-year work, he calmly accepts this possibility as the source of his contentment is first and foremost his family (Pușcariu, 1978, pp. 227-228).

Regarding the couple Ferdinand I – Queen Marie, the studies have often highlighted the character incompatibilities, the concealed scandals, the progressive estrangement aggravated during the interwar years (Ciupală, 2017, pp. 290-291). Queen Marie’s diary allows the reader to form a more nuanced view on this topic. While it is true that their relationship lacks the aura of sentimentality that envelops the Pușcariu family, it nevertheless functions on the basis of an authentic partnership. On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their marriage, she concludes that the essential element of their union is the love for their country, strengthened by the recent misfortunes they had to face together (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 338). Although she frequently expresses her exasperation with his lack of initiative and his inability to make resolute decisions, she is also a perceptive and accurate judge of his qualities. Above all, she is aware of the authenticity of his patriotic feelings that make him take the radical decision to sacrifice his family ties for the benefit of the nation whose king he is (Queen Marie of Romania, 2014, p. 103). Even if she disapproves of the king’s acceptance to perform humiliating tasks such as meeting with malicious enemies in order to negotiate the peace treaty, she understands that this attitude is also an expression of his devotion to his country (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 408).

At the same time, she is careful not to undermine her husband’s authority by taking part in public acts of protest (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 426). Their tumultuous disputes take place in private. Also, at the end of the war, it is to him that she gives credit for accomplishing the national dream of the Romanians and claims no merit for herself. On a more personal note, another strong – although less overt – link between them is represented by the children. Thus, the prospect of exile or captivity in the context of the political changes in Russia makes both parents certain that they do not wish to part with their children but want to keep them under their protection for as long as possible (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 294).

An interesting parallel can be drawn between the two couples – Ferdinand-Marie and Sextil-Leonora. Although Marie is often exasperated with Ferdinand’s indecisiveness and lack of initiative, both of them are intensely preoccupied with the course of the events and the best course of action that would turn them to the country’s advantage. Such interests come with the status but are also attributable to their authentic patriotic feelings for their adoptive county. By contrast, the correspondence between Leonora and Sextil reveals the couple’s continuous effort to make abstraction of the ongoing events through the projection of past or future private contentment. This passive endurance of a necessary evil is illustrative for the general feeling among the Romanians from Transylvania who found themselves involved in a war that was not their own. Unable to avoid the military obligations, they looked for symbolic and, when possible, concrete means of evading them.

Concerning Yvonne Blondel, the representation of her role as a married woman is perhaps the most curious one. At the start of the war, she was married to the prefect of Silistra, Jean Cămărășescu, one of the local officials that attempted to open the eyes of the military authorities in Bucharest to the perilous situation of the Romanian army on the southern bank of the Danube. The crude response he received from General Iliescu and the prevailing narrow-mindedness of the decision-makers are the cause of an eloquent diatribe that Yvonne Blondel directs at the military leaders, which is not unlike Queen Marie's frequent critical remarks regarding the malicious atmosphere that seemed to reign among the General Staff (Blondel, 2005, p. 67). However, the journal relies very little on such secondary accounts, no matter how reliable, and mostly focuses on recording personal experiences. In fact, her husband is never mentioned as such throughout her diary and after the escape to Bucharest from Silistra, he is no longer mentioned at all. It is the editor's opinion that she may have removed such references at a later date, when she recopied her notes, due to the fact that, in the interim, she had remarried (Dodille, 2005, p. 15). However, judging by her accounts of the events that occurred after her departure for Medgidia, one can surmise that from that point on she may not have been accompanied by her husband in her peregrinations. In her case, this is one role that is either obliterated or not played at all during the war.

#### The Mother

Queen Marie's six children are prominent characters in her war diary. While the eldest is given military responsibilities, the daughters follow their mother's example and work as nurses. But the child that takes centre stage in the diary is the absent one. After his passing, Prince Mircea becomes the symbol of everything that is lost and has to be reconquered throughout the war. Deprived of his presence, his mother devotes her attention to hundreds of other children, who receive food, clothes and shelter in several establishments that bear his name. He is present in her writings, which make the soldiers eager to reconquer the capital in order to adorn his tomb with flowers (Queen Marie of Romania, 2014, p. 385). He is also the symbol of resistance in the occupied capital: on the day of his death, memorial services are held in the churches (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015a, p. 313). At the same time, her motherly tenderness extends from children to the wounded soldiers and then to the entire nation, whom she learns to accept and care for despite their failings (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015b, p. 156, p. 284).

Leonora Pușcariu also excelled in the role of mother. Throughout the war, she wrote more than 1,000 letters to her husband, which, according to him, were mainly daily accounts of their everyday activities revealing "the numerous troubles Leonora had to overcome especially for [the children's] sake" (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 306). Since these letters no longer exist, it is not possible to present a detailed picture of their lives. However, the reader may get a glimpse of what they might have been from the sparse references in Sextil Pușcariu's letters. In his mind, he sees Leonora making a pair of trousers out of twelve patches for their son, playing the piano in a rare moment of respite while the children play in the garden or worrying sick because of a serious illness of the boy. Perhaps the most relevant comment on this role of hers is made in a letter he writes to her on 18 August 1915:

"my love for you also encompasses a feeling that you cannot have for me. The feeling of profound gratitude for the pains and trouble you endured to bring our two children into this world. My love for you is not only the love for my wife, for the companion of my life, but also for the mother of my children. (...) I wish I were near you so that I could say all of these not in the clumsy words of a letter but in the silent language of a kiss or a look" (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 84).

This profound attachment to his family and the illustrative sentimental *intermezzi* quoted here, which regularly punctuate his discourse, reveal a side of his personality that would have been difficult to guess behind his public persona. The decision to publish such excerpts from his own letters, in an unadulterated form, stems from the intention to provide an authentic account of an individual experience of the war and also from the awareness that the target audience is not among his contemporaries but in a distant future, when the people portrayed in his writing will have acquired an aura similar to that of fictional characters.

The motherly role is another part that Yvonne Blondel did not play at the time. Nevertheless, there is one particular episode in which her devotion towards the people in her care takes a maternal form. It is the Serbian patients that impress her the most with their endurance, resignation, and aloofness. They are doubly isolated: they fight in a foreign land for a lost country and nobody around them speaks their mother tongue. In her compassion, the nurse attempts to compensate for this absence by an increased sympathy in her gestures:

“Taking care of these wounded foreigners, I strive to instil motherly tenderness in my eyes and in the gentleness of my gestures. When I feel that a connection is established from my heart to theirs, I feel elated” (Blondel, 2005, p. 221).

It is precisely the same expression – “from my heart to theirs” – that Queen Marie employs a few months later both in her diary and in an article that she writes for the soldiers, who find it so uplifting that they write back “From our hearts to hers”. Through gestures and words, the two women provide another sort of ammunition that is vital in such confrontations – moral support.

### The Writer

If it were not for the great responsibilities they undertook, their decision to keep diaries and the perseverance they showed in accomplishing this task daily would seem rather an unusual occupation in wartimes. On the other hand, one must admire the tenacity with which, at the end of a long and often exhausting day, they found the resources to sum up its events.

The most obvious motivation was the realisation that they were living in extraordinary times and that such events needed to be recorded as they unfolded. Almost right from the start, Yvonne Blondel notes that

“From now on, I want to be more faithful to my diary and to write down my impressions regularly. The place where I live is a powder keg and my days will certainly be filled with all sorts of incidents and accidents” (Blondel, 2005, p. 37).

“Scribbled” at four in the morning after an eventful day and a sleepless night, during a lunch break or while recovering after a period of intense pressure, “without too much concern for coherence and orthography” (Blondel, 2005, p. 83), the recent impressions are written down immediately so that she “will not believe later on that [her] memory exaggerates or digresses” (Blondel, 2005, p. 83). She is fully aware of the importance of the role of chronicler, no matter how subjective her perspective may be.

In contrast to Queen Marie, Yvonne Blondel does not attribute any aesthetic or rhetorical value to her writing. While the Queen is conscious of the power of her words – written or spoken, public or private – Yvonne Blondel lacks such confidence. The ability to capture the moment

with accuracy or the skill to move people towards a righteous behaviour are mostly aspirations not accomplishments, in her view. She wishes she had the talent to write:

“I would love to reflect in my little piece of mirror glass the truth about the hours I live and the entire long farandole of people I meet every day. It is true that even if I had this gift, I would certainly not have the time to use it. It’s one thing to scribble and it’s totally different... to write!” (Blondel, 2005, p. 181).

She would like to write:

“pages burning with truth which would then fly to the four corners of the world with their exact and profound description impressing the masses and causing a fear of war as terrible as the fear of plague or cholera” (Blondel, 2005, p. 249).

If she did not manage to capture the “entire farandole”, she nevertheless succeeded in taking accurate snapshots of some of the participants. Apart from the horrors and absurdities of the war, she keenly and even poetically observes the places which she visits in the rare moments of respite or which she conjures from the past. Also, her writing is not uniformly solemn and dramatic. Her text is punctuated with comic episodes that are particularly well evoked. The rush caused by the first air raid alert she witnesses is described in a humorous manner, which is just as effective in capturing primary human reactions as the tragic moments she beholds as well. On this particular occasion, the false alarm caused by a rare astronomical phenomenon, makes the people at the prefecture look for shelter in a large trench dug for this purpose in the yard. In the darkness and in the absence of a ladder, one of the maids, who brings with her two large suitcases filled in a hurry with various objects considered essential, unfortunately drops them and their content scatters over the people gathered in the trench:

“It was a shower of small bottles, underclothes, furs and all sorts of shoes. Those who were caught in this unexpected avalanche experienced what bombing felt like” (Blondel, 2005, p. 44).

Another false alarm finds her in Medgidia in the company of two compatriots, the Duke of Luynes and Robert de Flers, who, despite the circumstances, do not lose their sense of humour. The first target of Robert de Flers’s wit is Yvonne Blondel herself when he makes a brief inventory of the objects which she deemed important to save:

“apart from a small box containing my money and jewellery, he saw in my small bag a powder case next to a lipstick and a curling iron for my fringe. It followed a riot of laughter and teasing about the women’s coquetry, which never deserts them, not even in the most distressing situations” (Blondel, 2005, p. 133).

Such amusing anecdotes also reveal the ensemble of factors that worsen the situation: confusion, panic, mental contagion, lack of expertise or coordination. Through a kaleidoscope of such characteristic scenes, Yvonne Blondel actually presents a vivid series of images from the war in the manner of a documentary film.

Queen Marie writes as she lives. Her diary is not only an account of her actions but also a writing log. She writes easily, extensively and for a diversity of purposes. She writes to raise money for various charitable causes: the Red Cross, war orphans (*My Country*) and prisoners (prose poem). Another aim is to provide comfort and encouragement to her soldiers, so she writes articles for various newspapers that reach the front, but also prepares calendars or books of prayers for them. She writes to officials from different countries in order to ask for support for her people. She writes articles to be published abroad to express her country’s gratitude for the support received from the Allies. She writes stories for her children, which she intends to publish for the benefit of all the Romanian children. Last but not least, she writes for herself to escape the

pressure of the events. She is aware of the gripping power of her writing, which she attributes to the sincerity of feelings, and uses it in the service of her country as well.

The sheer amount of her writings during the war makes it impossible to do justice to her qualities as an author within the space of an article. They are deserving of a separate study that would address this topic from multiple perspectives such as the variety of genres and target readers, their immediate or long-term purposes, the private discourse versus the public discourse, the bilingual form of her texts and her relationship with her translators, the transformation of the same theme across different genres (for instance, the loss of her child as recounted in the diary, in *My Country* and in the article written for the soldiers on the front) and the reception on the part of her audience. Her diary would constitute a crucial element of such an approach both as a record of these aspects and as an object of textual analysis.

While Queen Marie's and Yvonne Blondel's diaries are written from the start with a yet unknown audience in view and therefore adjusted so as to protect the most personal thoughts, Sextil Pușcariu's letters have one sole addressee – his wife. For this reason, and also because “they are not meant to make an impression on unknown readers (...) they are absolutely sincere” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 32).

The writing style is also a significant topic in the couple's correspondence. Apart from an intention to protect her or their privacy, one of the reasons why Leonora Pușcariu may have wished for her letters to be destroyed is a certain lack of confidence in her own writing abilities, which she confesses to her husband:

“You write to me, my dear, that you have a ‘helpless’ style and cannot express your feelings in a beautiful manner. Your style is just as you are: simple, sincere, pure. I wouldn't wish it were otherwise because in every word you write I want to find you just as I love you. (...) I wouldn't exchange your letters for the most literary letters in the world. I want to know everything about our home, especially now, when I am so far away; when you describe to me what Hontî said or what our Fizna answered (...), your letter tells me more than any treaty of psychology” (Pușcariu, 1978, pp. 43-44).

The simple depiction of the household's daily events transposes him in the presence of his loved ones and allows him to participate in their activities from afar. The quality of Leonora's letters and ultimately of her character can be inferred from the effect her writing has on their recipient:

“When I read your dear letter, I felt like jumping for joy” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 48); “I am reading the letter received last night and written by you on 29 November, right after we parted. How beautiful and warm it is! I was so touched by the contentment that my visit brought all of you” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 56).

The letters often reflect the couple's union of minds:

“Yesterday evening, I received the letter you sent on 30 December, in which you wrote to me almost the same things I wrote to you on that day” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 106), namely recollections of various moments spent together. It is not just words that the letters carry from one to the other but “our very souls with the entire boundless affection we have for each other and for our children” (Pușcariu, 1978, p. 82).

The idea that the style gives the true measure of one's character is also brought into relief by means of comparison. Reading Leonora's letter in parallel with the letter of a common acquaintance, Sextil Pușcariu concludes that the latter is:



“full of phrases that say almost nothing and garnished with courtesy”, while the first is appreciated for “the sober, natural style, devoid of prima donna trills. In her style, you recognise a person that changes her opinions daily (...) – in your letter, a person who knows what she wants, whom the circumstances may influence but not change, in other words a complete human being” (Puşcariu, 1978, p. 186).

In the end, the value of such writings is directly proportional to the circumstantial purpose they serve – that of providing moral comfort and support throughout an extended period of distress at the microcosmic level of the family.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three accounts complete each other allowing the reader to fill in the blanks in one narrative with information from another and to identify similar views on the same topic, which confirms their accuracy. The autobiographical works also provide access to backstage events and especially to the interpretations that their authors give them. Being recorded in real time, such works also bring into relief the metamorphoses that the authors undergo under the influence of these experiences. So, what do the three texts reveal about the way in which the women’s roles were shaped by the war?

As the previous incursions have shown, to a certain extent the roles remain unchanged. Women continue to watch over their families attempting to guard them from the brutal intrusion of outside events. In different forms, they all play a major part in keeping up the spirits of the combatants by drawing attention to the ideal they fight for. At the same time, most of them put aside what might be called the shallow side of emancipation reflected in their mondain life before the start of the war and focus on meeting the stringent needs that are the specific outcome of the war. However, their merits did not go unnoticed and, at the end of the war, King Ferdinand I proclaimed the universal suffrage. On this occasion, his wife expressed her contentment that this achievement was entirely his merit without the intervention of his advisors (Queen Marie of Romania, 2015b, p. 381).

The most striking aspect is the inner change, which is best summed up in the last pages of Queen Marie’s diary. The war brought her extremely close to misery, pain and poverty but also taught her the value of effort, charity and readiness for the most difficult tasks – an experience she shared with many other women on every front. What has been said about British and American nurse writers also applies to the two women on the Romanian front: they “wrote reflectively [...] focusing on both their extraordinary encounters with the wounds of war and the transformative nature of their experiences” (Hallett, 2016, p. xi). It is particularly the second aspect that this article attempted to bring into relief following the progressive changes in the heroines’ views of the world as the events unfolded. However, due to the extent, complexity and diversity of her writings, Queen Marie’s special contribution to the large field of feminine war literature could not be explored here but in passing and remains to be investigated further in light of the questions raised by these parallelisms.

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