Although J. M. Barrie is primarily remembered for *Peter Pan* (1904), he was one of the most popular playwrights of the Edwardian era. Leading actors, actresses, and theater managers partnered with him, other prominent literary figures respected him, and before the war he was made “Baronet.” In a time when colleagues such as Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones were “strangely quiet,”—the exception being Bernard Shaw, who caused a storm after writing *Common Sense About the War*—Barrie was one of the few recognized playwrights who continued to write new works throughout World War I (WWI), and to receive frequent revivals of his earlier works.

Four of Barrie’s one-act plays (*The New Word, The Old Lady Shows Her Medals, The Well-Remembered Voice, Barbara’s Wedding*) were written between 1915 and 1918 and published together as *Echoes of War* (1918). A reading of these four one-acts reveals a narrative of wartime Britain: the collection begins with one family sending their son off to war and ends with another family that must come to terms with loss and an awareness of changing times. Each play deals with a different family, but collectively they suggest an “Every Family,” peopled not with unbelievable heroes and heroines (as was often typical of drama depicting war), but more realistic characters, neither perfect nor immortal. Barrie’s wartime drama, often considered quaint and sentimental, has largely been ignored by scholars, but a reconsideration demonstrates that his works are of critical merit, insightfully depicting aspects of the British experience of the Great War.

**Barrie in Wartime Theatrical Panorama**

After England declared war in 1914, there was a moment’s hesitation, in which it was debated whether attending a theatrical performance during wartime was appropriate or patriotic. Thereafter, the theater went on to a booming business, in which there was an upsurge of attendance from all
classes. A series of revivals and the popular rejection of plays considered serious or highbrow were matched by a predominance of musical extravaganzas, revues, and star turns on the music-hall stage. One example, *Chu Chin Chow*, a revue with a vaguely Eastern setting and choruses of harem girls, ran for over 2,000 performances and seemed to encapsulate the theatergoer’s preference for escapist theater.

The theatricals that did deal with the war in its own time were largely packaged as melodramas, and the staged was flooded with a flurry of hastily written patriotic dramas. The war was romanticized and sanitized on the stage with predictable plots and characters. These plays often contained “unbelievably virtuous soldier heroes” and equally evil villains, pretty heroines who only loved their heroes when they agreed to enlist, and spies masquerading as English citizens (which helped fester anti-German hysteria and xenophobia).

When war atrocities were shown, they only underscored the inhumanity of the Prussian enemy that showed no mercy to innocent (usually female Belgium or French) victims. Subsequent theater history narratives have largely dismissed World War I theater as unworthy of scholarly attention.

Without resorting to the formulaic plots that so many other wartime plays followed, Barrie’s plays supported the British cause. Without being truly unpatriotic, his dramas did not deny the humanity of the enemy and contained moments of subtle doubt. His dramas explored the shifting attitudes of Britain to the war, emphasizing recurring themes of sacrifice, patriotism, and the breakdown of class structure. An anonymous observer of wartime drama stated:

> It is not an easy thing to write a play for wartime audiences. Before the war, for instance, Bernard Shaw could amuse, […] But with the advent of national service and active patriotism, his comic recipe fails. On the other hand, Sir James Barrie […] so emphatically succeeds that the public cries for more.

The reactions to the war that Barrie portrayed ranged from distrust of the Germans to realism about the war and its effects on families, from determination that the war must continue at all costs to a nostalgic looking back to pre-war Europe with a desire that things could have remained unchanged. Although Barrie wrote many popular full-length dramas, Barrie excelled at the one-act and his shorter works were ideal for stars desiring to perform on the variety stage, as well as for private theatricals given for charity. As Christopher Innes explains, “In Barrie’s hands the one-act play could explore a single situation or character in depth, exploiting the close focus and the unified emotional tone. […] Barrie, […] who never lost his feeling for the common people, reached a far broader public than he could with his longer plays.”

*The New Word* was first performed in March 1915 on the variety stage as a curtain raiser to Barrie’s revue *Rosy Rapture: The Pride of the Beauty Chorus*. Although his revue was given an unfavorable review from *The Times*, *The New Word* was well received, running for seventy-eight performances. *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* premiered with two additional