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**‘The best disguise’: performing femininities for  
clandestine purposes during the Second World War**

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All the girls would have found it difficult to carry out their missions unless they had been consummate actresses, studying each new person that they were to become and slipping into it like a character on the stage.

Beryl Escott, historian<sup>1</sup>

Women performed dangerous missions in gender-integrated combat groups, short of combat itself, because it was commonly recognized that of all resisters, they had the best disguise: they were women!

Paula Schwartz, historian<sup>2</sup>

War is a revealing site for a discussion of femininity. Ideologically, the waging of war is premised on the underlying principle of combatant males fighting to protect non-combatant females. Yet the role of women in the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a Second World War organisation, undermines this rationale since involvement in paramilitary work provided opportunities to subvert conventional

gendered divisions of labour.<sup>3</sup> Prevailing understandings of femininity and what constituted feminine behaviour were brought into particularly sharp focus by the demands of combatant work. In order to remain at liberty to undertake their clandestine role, the SOE agents had to pass as civilians. 'Passing' is the term used to refer to the process whereby individuals attempt to appropriate the characteristics of the 'Other' and desire not to be recognised as different. Passing is essentially about undermining the scopic and the specular, showing the visible to be an unreliable signifier of authenticity. Moreover, so as to pass as civilian women, female agents had consciously to undertake particular types of performances as the first quotation suggests. My conception of performance is informed by Judith Butler's theory of performativity.<sup>4</sup> She argues that gender acts, which produce the effect of an internal core, are inscribed on the body and thus the actions that profess to express the identity actually constitute the identity itself. Gender identities therefore do not pre-exist practices of femininity but emerge from performances that conceal their constitutiveness. Hence, gender is an enactment that masks the mechanisms of its own status as performance and erases the means by which it is produced. The display so seamlessly imitates 'reality' that it goes undetected as performance and is read as authentic and original. To understand gender in terms of performance and to recognise identity as a process of becoming through action, rather than the expression of an already fixed identity, is particularly fruitful in an exploration of femininity in my study of the Second World War. I will argue that female agents deliberately enacted and embodied various modes of femininity to enable them successfully to undertake their combatant role in the traditionally masculine arena of war.

One prominent feature of female agents' narratives is their accounts of the ways in which femininity was knowingly employed to deceive German soldiers on guard at

checkpoints and controls. Women used their clothing and other accessories to conceal incriminating material, embodied disguises and undertook displays of flirtation and fragility to facilitate passing. This chapter will first explore testimonies that narrate the ways that female agents employed conventional forms of temporally-specific attractiveness in order to assist passing. Second, it will discuss accounts that record the effectiveness of enactments of traditional feminine conduct. It is my contention, borne out by reference to the literature about the SOE, that female agents mobilised locally and historically specific forms of femininity as appropriate to their situations and that these gender performances usually made it possible for them to fit into civilian society, passing as non-combatant women. Furthermore, I note that the performances of female agents can be read very differently: although at the moment of undertaking the performance, they appeared to be maintaining conventional understandings of what it was to be a woman, in retrospect female combatants can be seen to be destabilising these understandings. Historian Joan Tumblety asserts that ‘French women during the Occupation were able to subvert sexual stereotypes under the guise of fulfilling them.’<sup>5</sup> Female agents operational in France, as well as in Belgium and the Netherlands, were able to destabilise traditional norms of femininity while ostensibly conforming to them by undertaking performances revolving around specific feminine codes of appearance, hair, clothing, flirtation and fragility. Not only did these enactments give them the freedom to undertake their work; they also masked the masculine connotations of working in the Resistance. Their performances can therefore be interpreted as having dual meanings.

Displays of femininity, however, were only employed when necessity arose, and accordingly the last section of the chapter will explore what the ‘reality’ was for female agents when they were not performing femininity in order to pass. Using the

example of Nancy Wake, who herself occasionally performed various modes of femininity while operational in France, I will suggest that the everyday experiences of female combatants were much more in keeping with what is conventionally perceived as masculine behaviour.

This chapter is thus an exploration of textual accounts which narrate how femininities, which were strategic and empowering, could be mobilised and how the necessities of war impacted upon femininity. I shall be referring to a wide range of texts, including published auto/biographies of SOE agents, secret SOE files written during the war, oral history interviews, television documentaries and films. Considering this range of written, oral and filmic accounts will facilitate a broad scrutiny of how the performance of femininity was, indeed, 'the best disguise'.

### **Ungentlemanly warfare**

The Second World War organisation the Special Operations Executive was the brainchild of Winston Churchill, who exhorted it to 'Set Europe Ablaze' in sabotage and subversion. Formed in July 1940, during Britain's 'darkest hour', the SOE was a break with tradition. M. R. D. Foot, the official historian of the organisation, notes that the 'SOE represented an acknowledgement by the British government that war was no longer entirely a gentleman's affair.'<sup>6</sup> Ungentlemanly conduct was envisaged as taking the form of sabotaging factories, cutting telephone cables and derailing trains. Perhaps it was the ungentlemanly nature of the organisation that facilitated the recruitment of women – as non-gentlemen – into the ranks of the SOE. Hitherto, women were excluded from the organisation because lawyers in the SOE believed that by recruiting female agents, it would be contravening the Geneva Convention, which stated that women could not bear arms.<sup>7</sup> However, the SOE was able to circumvent the combat taboo by

seconding its female recruits to the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry,<sup>8</sup> whose independent, voluntary and civilian status placed them beyond the remit of the Geneva Convention. Consequently, women began to be conscripted and trained. Thirty-nine women were infiltrated into France, three into the Netherlands and two into Belgium.

### **The gendering of courier work**

F section, which directed operations in France, built up a network of independent *reseaux* or circuits, incorporating an organiser, an arms instructor, a wireless operator and a courier. Each circuit was given a name, usually that of a masculine occupation, such as FOOTMAN or SALESMAN. Some tasks, however, were explicitly denied to women as a gendered division of labour was developed within the SOE with women being sent into France only as wireless operators and couriers. (In the Netherlands and Belgium, couriership was the only role undertaken by women.) The SOE files state that women were allocated the role of courier in resistance networks for very gender specific reasons: it was believed that women possessed skills and attributes that made them more suitable for this work. The following is an excerpt from an SOE file from the period on operations in the Netherlands which offers a number of explanations as to why this was the case:

Girl couriers were used extensively, because it was a fact that women were rarely stopped at controls; and only during the period immediately before the Liberation - and even then rarely - were they searched. They were seldom picked up in mass arrests. They provided excellent cover for their movements about the country by visiting friends, carrying out shopping expeditions and later, foraging the country for food.<sup>9</sup>

The author of this SOE file claims that female couriers possessed several distinct advantages over men which resulted in less frequent searches at controls in the Netherlands. One asset alluded to is the statement that women were unlikely to be suspected of being engaged in the Resistance. This did not pertain solely in the Netherlands. Groups of men of any nationality who were not engaged in work looked suspicious. This was partly because it was generally assumed that 'terrorists' were male and it was a few years into the war before it was recognised that women were agents as well. German soldiers were slow to realise that young, attractive women were politicised and involved in the Resistance and, moreover, that they were exploiting this misconception.

Assumptions about the supposedly natural affiliation of women with domesticity protected them: women who were ostensibly fulfilling housewifely duties while undertaking resistance work, were able to go about undetected. The private, domestic tasks traditionally performed by women offered female agents immunity and provided them with a cover for their clandestine work. Feminine identity was closely linked to domesticity and this could be taken advantage of, enabling women to move freely under the pretence of performing domestic chores. Under the guise of the domestic and/or maternal figure, female agents could easily pass as civilians and negotiate controls without being searched. Women thus made use of the gender tags of activities such as shopping and childcare to cover their clandestine activities. By undertaking these domestic chores, the female combatants reproduced the gendered division of labour of that time and setting. Performing these domestic functions for a military cause altered their meaning in that they became quasi-military acts in themselves. But due to the importance of the clandestine nature of these tasks, it was necessary to maintain their feminine identification, and it is this that made them so

successful. In this sense, women were, in effect, protected from being read as suspected 'terrorists' because of the very fact that they were women and also because of the conventional tasks assigned to women. It was the miscalculation by German soldiers that women were unlikely to be involved in clandestine operations that was so effectively exploited by the SOE, which employed female couriers.

In certain circumstances, the trappings of femininity, usually associated with oppression, can be used as levers of power and agency. Hence the feminine masquerading undertaken by agents, while being conformist in terms of contemporary norms, has, from a retrospective perspective, a disruptive dimension. Thus, their performances can be interpreted as having dual meanings. A retrospective evaluation of female agents' activities unfolds the irony about their displays of conventional enactments of femininity. At the moment of their performances, traditional understandings of femininity were upheld and played out: what constituted femininity was not challenged. But, subsequently, their daily enactments of traditional gendering can be seen to have different meanings. In retrospect, their feminine performances can be viewed as a subversion of traditional notions of femininity. Hence, although the activities female combatants were engaging in *were* transgressive of traditional gender norms, this was not evident at the time of their performances and the clandestine nature of their work was concealed under a mask of locally and historically specific femininity.

The dual meanings of female agents' performances can be seen in the following example of FREELANCE courier, Nancy Wake. She undertook an arduous bicycle ride in search of an SOE wireless operator who could transmit a message to London for her. She cycled over 500km in 71½ hours through enemy lines in France. In her autobiography, Wake recalls one trip into a small village to purchase vegetables: 'I

cycled to the local markets and filled my string bag with all the fruit and vegetables I could buy without food coupons, hoping that I would pass for a housewife out shopping'.<sup>10</sup> Although most food products were rationed and coupons were needed to purchase them, some items, such as fruit, vegetables and nuts, were more readily available and could be obtained without vouchers. Buying food was a task undertaken more or less exclusively by women, and Wake hoped that she would be mis/taken for a French housewife undertaking her domestic chores. During this trip, numerous trucks passed her packed with waving soldiers. She returned the gesture despite the fact that, as she recalled, she 'longed to break their fucking necks'.<sup>11</sup> Wake also encountered numerous German-patrolled checkpoints: 'I would just look over to the officer, flutter my eyelashes and say "do you want to search *moi*?" And they would laugh flirtatiously, "No, Mademoiselle, you carry on"'.<sup>12</sup> This example illustrates that there is a fissure between Wake's performance that affirmed gendered divisions and the significance of her enactment for the accomplishment of the clandestine tasks in which she was engaged. It was in her mobilisation of dominant gender norms that her resistance to them becomes apparent.

Not only did childcare and shopping give female agents a reason for being out of the home, but also prams and shopping baskets could hide weapons and radio parts as this contemporary document suggests: 'Messages and packages were concealed in bicycle-frames, shopping baskets, hand-bags, the lining of clothes or round the waist under the clothes'.<sup>13</sup> Testimonies of SOE agents reveal that women did indeed conceal incriminating material upon their person and in their baggage. Jos Mulder Gemmeke, a courier who worked in the Netherlands, carried microfilms in the shoulder pads of her coat and behind the mirror of her powder compact;<sup>14</sup> the bag belonging to Yvonne Corneau, a wireless operator for the WHEELWRIGHT circuit



in the south of France, had a false bottom under which she secreted documents and radio parts;<sup>15</sup> and courier, Lise de Baissac, who also operated in France, strapped radio parts underneath the belt on her dress.<sup>16</sup> The masculine connotations of the Resistance materials they conveyed were thus literally cloaked in femininity. Evidence from both written and oral testimonies suggest that female agents routinely used both clothing and the trappings of femininity to smuggle documents and equipment in order to conceal their role as couriers.

In addition to this, until the latter stages of the war, German soldiers on guard at checkpoints were male,<sup>17</sup> and female agents frequently record consciously and deliberately performing femininity in their presence. Female agents' appearances and behaviours could contribute to images of civilian femininity that would place them beyond suspicion. They strategically used their knowledge of conventional gender relations and their awareness of the potency of feminine performances.

Jos Mulder Gemmeke, the Dutch agent who concealed messages in her shoulder pads, reflected upon the methods that she employed to deceive German soldiers:

You could change your hair, your clothes, you could charm a lot of people, flirt and I was then young so you could easily do that. Sometimes with a red hat I think, but it always worked... When I arrived at a station, if I had luggage which was heavy and dangerous, I looked for a German soldier and asked him to carry my luggage and it always worked. He did it!<sup>18</sup>

Mulder Gemmeke undertook a specifically feminine performance by mobilising a conventionally attractive appearance and appropriate conduct. In the rest of this chapter, I shall examine specific accounts of the mobilisation of the signifiers of femininity in order to explore further the gendered performances undertaken by female agents.

### **Femininity as appearance**

Signs of femininity take different forms in different cultural settings; there is no one ubiquitous and unified pattern. Consequently, gender practices change over time as they can be contested and reconstructed as circumstances alter. However, despite these shifts, prevailing notions of what constitutes femininity are surprisingly continuous, inflexible and resistant to change. Femininity is almost always bound up with physical appearance and seen as oriented towards male pleasure. In these respects, stereotypes of femininity have remained largely intact. That particular forms of physical appearance are often crucial signifiers of femininity can be illustrated in the quotation above, in which Jos Mulder Gemmeke recalls that hair and clothing could enable her to pass through train stations unchallenged. She notes that as key markers of gender difference, they could assist in the performance of femininity. Long hair, for example, has generally been constructed in Western culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as feminine and is perhaps one of the most durable and visible signifiers of femininity. By changing the style and length of her hair, as well as varying her clothing, she was able to present a different image of civilian femininity.

Testimonies of female agents illustrate the effectiveness of changing clothing for implementing a particular disguise and affecting different identities. They assumed the dress of ordinary housewives, rural peasant women or aristocratic socialites according to their circumstances. In each case, female agents either assumed the disguise in order to blend in, be inconspicuous and pass unnoticed or purposely to stand out and be observed. Clothing could thus be utilised as a tool for concealment

or, conversely, for exposure. There were therefore numerous strategies that they could pursue. Different circumstances called for performances of different types of femininity. On some occasions, urban glamour was opted for; during others, understated displays of rural femininity or even unglamorous, peasant femininity were considered more appropriate. Several positive and negative effects beset each, and the women had to select which they thought would increase the likelihood of continuing freedom. I will examine testimonies that emphasise various modes of feminine appearance which female agents often consciously employed as part of a strategy to avert discovery. I shall begin by exploring glamour.

Clothing can provide a repertoire of status symbols, signifying, as well as distinguishing, between classes. However, in the 1940s, clothing was rationed in most European countries and items were perpetually recycled. In this context, Jos Mulder Gemmeke's red hat was even more likely to catch the attention of German soldiers. Her smart, elegant appearance may have implied that she was of a high social standing, given that sophistication and poise have class connotations. The interaction between gender and class meant that glamorous, attractive women were often read as middle class.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, agents were advised by SOE staff to use class-specific signals. An SOE file commented that 'it was found an advantage for couriers to travel first class as this gave them more prestige with train controls.'<sup>20</sup> Passengers seated in first class were less likely to have their luggage subjected to thorough searches. This was perhaps because German soldiers were unlikely to perceive first-class travellers as 'terrorists'. Agents' accounts testify to the respect for social status that was instilled within German soldiers. Reflecting on her treatment by German officials, Odette Sansom, courier to the French SPINDLE circuit, asserted: 'In those days I called them a "race de valets". I think if you treated them in a certain way, as if they were almost

your servants, they had a type of respect for you'.<sup>21</sup> Sansom believed that the observance of social hierarchy was fundamental to German national identity. Consequently, invoking a middle class identity could be an effective passing strategy. This was useful not only because conventionally attractive, respectable-looking women were generally regarded as middle class, but also because displays of femininity were seen as indicative of inner character. On both counts, glamorous women were unlikely to be suspected of being involved in the Resistance.

This miscalculation was exploited mercilessly. An excerpt from a recent biography of Nancy Wake emphasises her consciousness about the potency of sexual allure:

Nancy's past experience had taught her that not only does sexual attraction not recognise national borders nor political divisions – meaning she had often been ogled by the very guards meant to check her – but the innate warmth and intimacy of that attraction was a great soother of possible suspicions. If she got it right, it had to seem beyond the range of possibilities for the Germans between her and her destination, that such an attractive young woman could be on a mission specifically devoted to bringing them carnage and destruction in the very near future. That, at least, is the factor Nancy intended to play to the hilt and she spent the twenty-four hours before departure rustling up the most attractive outfit she could get.<sup>22</sup>

Narrative accounts, then, suggest that female agents found it productive to accentuate their physical appearance. These women presented themselves so as to appear attractive to men. These were heterosexual performances in that they were oriented towards male pleasure and were dependent upon male soldiers' sexual approval in order to be successful. However, in addition to various beneficial effects of performing glamour, this could undoubtedly lead to some negative consequences.

Such appearances did not *always* protect these women from discovery; although female agents were afforded some protection, there was no safeguard against capture and some women were arrested despite such strategies. Indeed, the performance of feminine glamour could be highly ambiguous in that, although it might protect women from suspicion, it could also draw *too much* unwanted attention to agents as they worked. The attention they attracted as glamorous women made them more suspect than they would otherwise have been. Deliberate performances of femininity were, then, by no means unproblematic.

Occasionally, female agents attracted a different kind of attention, which was most unwanted. Shortly after parts of France had been liberated, Sonya Butt, a twenty-year-old courier and weapons instructor for the HEADMASTER circuit in France, embarked upon a new role with her organiser, going back and forth across the lines and providing the Americans with intelligence. Butt, who carried American papers in a secret pocket in her girdle, was sexually assaulted by two German soldiers:

I heard this marching behind me and I turned around and there were these two guys so I just smiled at them and went on my way and they followed me in and they raped me. One held me down. My first instinct was to put up a fight and then I thought no, I can't. I've got these papers. If I put up a fight, they're going to overpower me and then they'll probably strip me and we'd be in a worse mess than we already are in. I've just got to let them do it and get on with it... Anyway, it was quite an experience! But they didn't get my papers!<sup>23</sup>

Although being female and conventionally attractive have been recognised in both contemporary and post-war accounts as advantageous as I have shown, it was not *necessarily* a major benefit since these qualities could induce unwanted attention.

Sonya Butt's experience shows that female agents were as liable to assault and rape as were other young women.

In some instances, a less glamorous performance meant that female agents were not noticed and they merged into the background. If glamour is correlated with visibility, mundaneness resulted in relative concealment. For those who wanted to be comparatively invisible, it may have been necessary to downplay femininity in order not to attract attention. In order to be as inconspicuous as possible, Yvonne Baseden, WT operator to the SCHOLAR circuit in France, wore a very casual, plain grey skirt and a blue blouse: 'the idea was to blend in somehow.'<sup>24</sup> She didn't wear any make-up and styled her hair in a very simple way in order not to invite attention. When Diana Rowden, courier for the ACROBAT circuit, was concerned for her safety following the circulation of an accurate description of her by the French authorities, she changed her hair colour and style, disposed of all the clothing she possessed and borrowed clothes in a more modest fashion in order not to be recognised.<sup>25</sup>

Displays of ordinariness were only successful in specific contexts and agents had to select carefully the correct style for the situation. Upon visiting a larger town, WHEELWRIGHT courier Anne-Marie Walters realised that her appearance was unsuitably casual. In her autobiography, she notes: 'I discarded my beret, it was all right in a small town like Condom, but in Agen women wore high, complicated hair styles and even more complicated ear-rings'.<sup>26</sup> There were, therefore, fashion differences between cities, towns and country villages, and agents had to be aware of these variations in order to blend in, to look as inconspicuous as possible and be mis/taken as civilians.

Undertaking performances that totally lacked glamour was another strategy employed by some agents. On one occasion, when Nancy Wake needed to adopt a

disguise in order not to be recognised, she chose to dress in antiquated and outmoded clothing and to pass as a middle-aged peasant. In her autobiography, she writes:

I borrowed a long white piqué dress which must have been fashionable before World War I... I was... looking like a real country bumpkin, wet hair pulled back tight, no make-up, an old-fashioned dress, and wearing a pair of the farmer's old boots... Our cart and the produce were inspected several times by the Germans as we entered Aurillac; they did not give me a second look, even their first glance was rather disdainful. I did not blame them. I did not look very fetching.<sup>27</sup>

Wake's performance of unglamorous femininity was successful in that her drab appearance meant that she was comparatively invisible. Her one-off performance as a peasant farmer's daughter, which effected obscurity, contrasts with the attention that performances of middle-class femininity received. For many of the agents, the codes of middle-class femininity became associated with visibility, while those of working-class femininity were linked to invisibility. In her peasant attire, with her hair deliberately lank and without any trace of make-up, Wake was read as unrefined. Her lack of glamour held no fascination for the guards on duty at the controls, and as a result she was less noticeable, enabling her to pass successfully.

Stereotypes of the alluring female spy seducing her enemy, epitomised by Mata Hari,<sup>28</sup> might suggest that performances of glamour would always work and were the key to passing, as the cases of conventionally attractive women who were not suspected of engaging in paramilitary tasks suggest. Although this was sometimes the case, there is also evidence to indicate that in some instances glamour would have been inappropriate and unsuccessful. Indeed, auto/biographical evidence suggests that almost every type of femininity was employed by female agents to pass: glamour,

quotidian, lack of glamour, chic/urban and peasant/rural femininities are just some of the different stagings of femininity that I have discussed here. Agents had to decide what they felt would be the most suitable performance of femininity for the specific circumstances in which they were working, because choosing inappropriate modes of femininity could have led to capture. Appearance was thus crucial in constructing different identities, and, although the objective was to pass as a law-abiding civilian woman, the strategies to effect this were diverse.

### **Femininity as conduct**

Crucial to these heterosexual performances, which hinged upon the effect of the physical appearance of female agents on German soldiers, was both heterosexual flirtation and physical frailty. These were tactics that Jos Mulder Gemmeke employed to turn situations to her advantage. Theorist Susan Brownmiller asserts that ‘Feminine armour is never metal or muscle but, paradoxically, an exaggeration of physical vulnerability that is reassuring (unthreatening) to men’.<sup>29</sup> Memoirs, biographies and oral histories of veterans overflow with tales of female agents who stimulated chivalrous behaviour in German soldiers, who unknowingly transported suitcases containing radio sets and weapons across borders or past checkpoints. The slight physique and attractive appearance of Sonya Butt enabled her to take advantage of the conventional correlation of femininity with physical weakness. On numerous occasions German soldiers assisted her from trains and carried her suitcase through controls:



Ask for help if you want to bring your suitcase down. Don't try and do it by yourself if there's a German chap there. Ask him 'would you mind bringing down my heavy suitcase for me'. It just seemed the natural thing to do.<sup>30</sup>

There is an interesting tension between the performance of physical frailty and the mental strength that such performances required in order to be successful. The agents' performances of fragility suggested that they were exactly what they were not; they *did* fragility when it was thought to be necessary or useful in order to accomplish their tasks in relative safety and not because they *were* fragile. Hence there is a contradiction at the heart of such performances. Female agents' power was, therefore, ironically, vested in performances of physical weakness. Duping German soldiers into assisting with bags was made possible by female agents' invoking of traditional feminine behaviour by demonstrating helplessness and reliance on others, combined with a feminine appearance. By asking a German soldier to carry her baggage, a female agent elicited traditionally masculine behaviour from the soldier, while enacting femininity. Paradoxically, the much-used strategy of requesting assistance from German guards overturned conventional gender norms, despite seemingly reinforcing them.

Flirtation was a further strategy employed by Jos Mulder Gemmeke. Her flirtatious behaviour was consolidated by the signifiers of ideal femininity mentioned above – hair, clothes and appearance. Sociologist Beverley Skeggs asserts that flirtation involves an amalgam of the reproduction of conventional femininity, in particular passivity, helplessness and reliance on others; the stretching of traditional femininity, exemplified by the direct engaging in conversation; and the reproduction of heterosexuality.<sup>31</sup> Mulder Gemmeke's display of physical weakness, her active seeking of assistance and her heterosexual appearance and behaviour facilitated her

flirtation with German guards. Many performances involved the projection of conventionally feminine appearance and heterosexual flirtation that could turn precarious situations to women's advantage. A friendly disposition coupled with an attractive appearance could disarm soldiers much more effectively than the strategies employed by male agents, as Sonya Butt explains:

You just react to the moment and think 'I'll get by alright with a nice smile'. I just sort of smiled and waved to them. All the time. Women could get by with a smile and do things that men couldn't and no matter what you had hidden in your handbag or your bicycle bag, if you had a nice smile, you know, just give them a little wink. It just happened constantly, all the time. So I got away with it. It becomes sort of second nature... You did that [flirted] automatically. Absolutely. That was just par for the course. Just sort of went into the role automatically, just quite naturally.<sup>32</sup>

Written accounts of SOE agents' wartime experiences relate episodes of flirtatious encounters with German soldiers as the following extract from the biography of courier, Nancy Wake illustrates:

'I played the part of a giddy Frenchwoman who didn't give a bugger what happened in the war', Nancy recalls frankly. 'I was a *good-time girl*. I used to give Germans a date sometimes, sometimes three or four if I was away on a long trip and give them a little bit of hope. I played the part – I should have been an actress.'<sup>33</sup>

Nancy Wake was not the only agent to arrange meetings with German soldiers in order to negotiate checkpoints successfully. Beryl Escott illustrates the successful use of flirtation in her narration of an episode involving Patricia O'Sullivan, wireless operator to the French FIREMAN circuit. She was cycling down a country lane with

her radio set in her bicycle basket when she observed two German soldiers at a checkpoint:

Putting on her most sunny and beguiling smile, she rode boldly up to the two men, one of whom liked the look of her advanced some way up the road to meet her. She stopped and leaning on her bike, chatted animatedly with him. Flattered by her friendly attitude, he asked her to meet him for a drink... the other German awaited her, and while he examined her papers, she laid herself out to be just as delightful to him, consequently so bemusing him also that he completely forgot to examine her case, while excited by the notion of making his own assignation with her for that same evening... It had been a very close shave, only carried off by consummate acting and the brazen use of her charms.<sup>34</sup>

The exchange between the German soldiers and O'Sullivan illustrates the powerful and effective use of conventionally feminine appearance, coupled with appropriate feminine behaviour. Escott's couching of the episode in terms of 'putting on', 'carried off', 'consummate acting' and 'brazen use' emphasises the performative nature of femininity and illuminates O'Sullivan's agency. This show of femininity was an acting out of a performance that protected her from a potentially dangerous situation. O'Sullivan took the initiative by cycling confidently up to the German soldiers and actively seeking their attention. She played on the soldiers' heterosexual interest in her, permitting her to avert their gaze from her basket containing the wireless set and enabling her to outwit them.

The tactic of accepting engagements with German soldiers when in precarious situations has also been captured in filmic accounts of agents' experiences. The film *Carve Her Name With Pride*, chronicling the wartime activities of Anglo-French

agent Violette Szabo, depicts the heroine accepting two dinner invitations with an Obstführer, a high-ranking German official, neither of which she keeps.<sup>35</sup> The treatment of feminine performances in *Now It Can Be Told*, a documentary filmed in 1944 starring ex-SOE agents Harry Rée and Jacqueline Nearne as Felix and Cat, is quite different to that in *Carve Her Name With Pride*:

Cat – The police were searching luggage at the station and made me  
open my suitcases.

Felix – What did you do?

Cat – I tried sex appeal.

Felix – Did it work?

Cat – No, it was a complete flop! I had to open it.

Felix – What about the WT set?

Cat – I told him with a sweet smile that it was an X-ray machine.

Felix – Must have been a very sweet smile for him to swallow that!<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to other related texts, such as SOE documents and auto/biographies, which identify successful performances of femininity, this documentary downplays their effectiveness. The audience does not witness Cat's performance; rather we hear her reconstruction of the event when she informs Felix. This serves to de-emphasise her strategy, which is further dismissed by her claim that her performance was unsuccessful – she was compelled to open her suitcase despite her feminine performance. Nevertheless, it could be argued that her enactment of femininity was successful in that her smile stimulated a reaction and she was able to persuade the policeman that her suitcase contained a piece of medical apparatus. There is, then, ambivalence to this aspect of the SOE image in *Now It Can Be Told*. The documentary offered a down-to-earth, unglamorous account of the SOE which also

omitted the romance between the two central characters that later audiences of *Odette*,<sup>37</sup> *Carve Her Name With Pride* and, more recently, *Charlotte Gray*<sup>38</sup> have come to expect. That *Now It Can Be Told* was the official, government-sanctioned documentary of the SOE's F section might suggest that acknowledgement of feminine performances was considered unsuitable for public consumption. Yet the performance of Cat's flirtation was evidently too central to the construction of a female agent for the documentary to dismiss it altogether.

Both filmic and personal accounts, then, suggest that female agents found it productive to flirt and be responsive to German soldiers' advances in an attempt to avoid potentially dangerous situations. However, undertaking a flirtatious performance was not infallible and, on some occasions, female agents were arrested in spite of their enactments. Courier Sonya Butt, who had found flirting highly productive on numerous occasions, discovered that her flirtatious manner did not save her from imprisonment. As she was walking down a country road in mid-1944, she was stopped by two German soldiers, who demanded to see her papers. Despite 'flashing her most charming smile',<sup>39</sup> she was taken to a cell while her papers were checked. After several hours, she was released without an explanation. This episode indicates that a smile was not *necessarily* a safeguard against arrest and suggests that the heightened sensitivity on the part of Germans, due to the increasing possibility of defeat, meant that by 1944 women were no longer entirely beyond suspicion: the 'natural' cover they possessed had ceased to be an unqualified advantage by this point.

### **Non-feminine reality**

Female agents selected from these various strategies to assist their passing as civilian women. These particular enactments were intermittent and transitory, only undertaken when situations necessitated. As Yvonne Baseden asserted, 'it only came to the fore when it was necessary. I didn't live like that all the time. I popped in and out of it when I had to, which wasn't very often'.<sup>40</sup> So what was the 'reality' when female agents were not performing femininity in order to pass?

Nancy Wake, who on different occasions performed both drab peasant femininity and glamour, lived among seven thousand male comrades on the hillsides of the Auvergne, wearing khaki trousers, shirt, tie and beret, as well as army boots. Evenings were spent sitting round the fire, swigging whisky, participating in drinking competitions (which, she asserted, she always won), swearing, raucously singing and playing cards with her male colleagues. This was certainly no place for femininity. During the daytime, she would go on reconnaissance, ambush German troops or train men in weapons. On one occasion, Wake attacked the local Gestapo headquarters at Montluçon, running into the room throwing her grenades before retreating.<sup>41</sup> Wake also played a prominent role in the blowing up of a bridge over the Allier river. With the explosives strapped to them, she and four men climbed down the struts of the bridge to set the explosives in place.<sup>42</sup> Wake also participated in sabotaging an armaments and munitions store in Mont Mouchet. When she went to disable a sentry, he heard her and a struggle ensued. His bayonet penetrated her arm, but this did not impede her as she used her bare hands to kill him.<sup>43</sup> In an interview, Wake told me:

Tardivat [a Resistance colleague] said 'she is the most feminine woman I have ever met in my life, but in battle she's worth ten men'. So I changed. I was feminine, but fighting. All I wanted to do was to kill Germans. I didn't give a bugger about them, to kill Germans. Didn't care about it. I hated, I loathed the

Germans. I loathed them. As far as I was concerned, the only good one was a dead one and I don't care what anybody thinks of me. A dead German!<sup>44</sup>

Wake's assertion that she was 'feminine but fighting' emphasises that femininity could also be belligerent. She dispels the myth that women are innately pacifistic by asserting that she relished killing German soldiers, and experienced no remorse for doing so. Her admission of hatred and loathing for the Germans and the manner in which it was said were quite startling. The unequivocal remark 'the only good one was a dead one' was spoken without passion, in a cool, calculated manner. From 'I hated, I loathed the Germans' to 'I don't care what anybody thinks of me', Wake's voice remained dispassionate and deliberate. The short, emphatic 'a dead German!' at the end of this statement, accompanied by a decisive nod of the head, gave closure to the topic of conversation. She appears to have had no moral compunction about ending the lives of dozens of Germans, and states that other people's assessment of her ruthlessness had no effect upon her. Wake's lived reality was thus more in keeping with what is conventionally regarded as masculine behaviour.

Although Wake was by no means representative of the female agents, her experiences illustrate that while enactments of femininity were infrequent performances contrived to facilitate passing, the everyday reality was quite different. The actuality for female wireless operators, such as Yvonne Baseden and Patricia O'Sullivan, was much more mundane than the tense excitement provoked by performing femininity: hours sat at their radios coding, decoding, receiving and transmitting messages was more typical of their daily work. Feminine performances were thus infrequent interludes between days of tedious technical work. Female agents' everyday experiences were thus quite different to the sporadic displays of femininity that I have discussed above.

This chapter has examined both written and oral testimonies of men and women veterans, as well as analysing the SOE files and filmic accounts, for the purpose of exploring some of the crucial strategies employed by female agents to avert discovery and to facilitate passing. As I have shown, in certain circumstances, some female agents courted danger for the greater protection it might offer: drawing attention to their chic, urban appearance and flirtatious behaviour, and thereby inducing the attention of German soldiers in order that the enemy would unwittingly give protection and safe passage. However, in other situations, some female agents deliberately performed a quotidian, rural femininity and occasionally even unglamorous, peasant femininity in order to blend into the surrounding scene and be less visible.

The gendered performances enacted by female combatants were not deconstructive, challenging or parodic, but had life and death consequences. These feminine performances were enacted out of necessity, not out of choice or for entertainment - they were intentional and strategic. However, many derived pleasure from the successful negotiation of such encounters. Patricia O' Sullivan, a wireless operator, reported that she felt 'elated' after safely negotiating checkpoints when she travelled with her radio set.<sup>45</sup> These women were extraordinarily conscious of the power that feminine performances could render, and undertook them for their own protection. Moreover, it was their knowledge of the effectiveness of particular feminine performances that enabled them to choose from a repertoire of modes of femininity and embody that which was suitable to the situation. Female agents therefore had to be very adept at choosing the guise of femininity that they would display: how they comported themselves, their posture, accent, behaviour, clothing and hairstyle, were



all crucial in the performance of specific modes of femininity, but were not necessarily appropriate to all situations. Female combatants consciously made use of heterosexual, feminine appearance and realised a range of behaviours suitable for the circumstances. Their performances required a consciousness about the effects of their actions. This doubleness (or consciousness), the seeing of oneself through the eyes of others, was crucial in facilitating passing. Female agents had to undertake an ongoing self-surveillance or circumspection that ensured an awareness of the performative effectiveness of bodily gestures. Their performances denied the work that went into producing a specific mode of civilian femininity and concealed the performative nature of their enactments. Performances such as these erased, rather than exposed, their dissimulation and it is this concealment of work which not only produced the illusion of interiority in the effects of their feminine performances but also facilitated passing.

The conventions of femininity can be simultaneously seen as being maintained and undermined. On the one hand, there was the seemingly apparent upholding of the customs of femininity by female agents in their performances. However, conventional understandings of what it meant to be a woman were put to extremely unconventional and unfeminine purposes, which resulted in an undermining of gender norms incurred by the kind of military activity in which the SOE was engaged.

Women's involvement in combatant work suggests that there were opportunities for a subversion of traditional gender relations, given the signification of war as a masculine enterprise. Seen in a longer-term perspective, women were breaking down established Western divisions of male and female tasks in war by participating actively at the 'front line'. However, the fact that women were allocated the very gender-specific task of courier and because of their daily re-enactments of localised

and historically specific forms of femininity, this potential to undermine gender norms was never fully realised and there was little conflict concerning women overstepping traditional gender delineations. In the Second World War, women were involved in undercover work but they were concentrated in particularly female-appropriate positions. This is in direct contrast to more recent conflicts, such as the Gulf War, in which there were great instabilities with women undertaking traditionally masculine tasks, including being in charge of men within the combat zone.<sup>46</sup> Rather than challenging the gendered division of labour, female SOE agents' performances of femininity resulted in the production and rehearsal of conventional gender acts; the irony is that they were challenging gendered notions about what tasks women should undertake in wartime, but in a way that was not explicit.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> B. Escott, *Mission Improbable: A Salute to the RAF Women of SOE in Wartime France*, (Sparkford: Patrick Stephens, 1991), p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> P. Schwartz, 'Partisanes and Gender Politics in Vichy France' in *French Historical Studies*, 16:1 (Spring, 1989), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Much has been written on gender instabilities in wartime. See P. Schwartz; G. DeGroot, 'Whose finger on the trigger?': Mixed anti-aircraft batteries and the female combat taboo', *War in History*, 4: 4 (1997), 434-53; P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); G. DeGroot and C. Peniston-Bird, (eds.) *A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual Integration in the Military*, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> J. Tumblety, 'Review of M. C. Weitz's *Sisters in the Resistance*', in *Women's History Review*, (1997), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> M. R. D. Foot, *Resistance*, (St Albans: Granada Publishing Limited, 1978), p. 141. The term 'gentleman' has class connotations and Foot suggests that the men who fought and died in battles were upper-class men. Yet this was never the reality of war.

<sup>7</sup> The British women's services preserved the non-combatant status of women as enforced by the Geneva Convention; the ATS women who staffed the anti-aircraft batteries for example could aim the guns, but not load or pull the trigger. See G.

DeGroot, “‘I love the scent of cordite in your hair’: Gender dynamics in mixed anti-aircraft batteries during the Second World War”, *History*, 82: 265 (1997), 73-92.

<sup>8</sup> The FANYs, which was the first women’s service, was established in 1907 by Captain Edward Charles Baker. See H. Popham, *FANY: The Story of the Women’s Transport Service, 1907-1984*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1984). I. Ward, *F.A.N.Y. Invicta*, (London: Hutchinson, 1955).

<sup>9</sup> PRO HS 7/66. (Held in Public Records Office, Kew).

<sup>10</sup> N. Wake, *The Autobiography of the Woman the Gestapo Called the White Mouse*, (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985), p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> P. Fitzsimons, *Nancy Wake: The Inspiring Story of One of the War’s Greatest Heroines*, (London: Harper Collins Entertainment, 2002), p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 239.

<sup>13</sup> PRO HS 7/66.

<sup>14</sup> Mulder Gemmeke featured on *Timewatch: Secret Memories*, broadcast on BBC 2 on 11 March 1997.

<sup>15</sup> B. Escott, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with L. Villameur, (née de Baissac) 17 April 2002.

<sup>17</sup> As the war progressed, German women began staffing checkpoints in France and as a consequence, more female resisters were searched, incriminating evidence was found and many were arrested. An SOE file records: ‘During the later part of the Occupation, controls and searches by women attached to German C.E. [counter-espionage] became more and more rigorous.’ PRO HS 7/66.

<sup>18</sup> Mulder Gemmeke, *Timewatch*.

<sup>19</sup> In this context, femininity is more transportable across class than masculinity. This may not be true for all other instances, however.

<sup>20</sup> PRO HS 7/66.

<sup>21</sup> O. Sansom, (1986), interviewed by Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, classification code 9478.

<sup>22</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 236-7.

<sup>23</sup> Personal interview with S. d’Artois (née Butt) 19 June 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with Y. Burney, (née Baseden) 11 April 2000.

<sup>25</sup> R. Kramer, *Flames in the Field: The Story of Four SOE Agents in Occupied France*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> A-M Walters, *Moondrop to Gascony: An Account of the Author’s Experiences in France during 1945 as a Member of the French Resistance*, (London: Macmillan, 1947), p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Wake, pp. 132-3.

<sup>28</sup> Mata Hari was a Dutch born exotic dancer and courtesan who became embroiled in espionage by accident at the behest of her German lover. She was suspected of being a double agent working for both the French and the German authorities, and was finally captured, tried and executed by the French in 1917. See J. Keay, *The Spy Who Never Was: The Life and Loves of Mata Hari*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1987). More recent analyses judge her spying capacities as non-existent.

<sup>29</sup> S. Brownmiller, *Femininity*, (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with S. d’Artois (née Butt) 19 June 2002.

<sup>31</sup> B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, (London: Sage, 1997), p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> Personal interview with S. d’Artois (née Butt) 19 June 2002.

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- <sup>33</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 111. Author's emphasis.
- <sup>34</sup> Escott, pp. 169-70.
- <sup>35</sup> *Carve Her Name With Pride*, film, directed by Lewis Gilbert and produced by Daniel M. Angel, starring Virginia McKenna, 1958.
- <sup>36</sup> *Now It Can be Told*, film documentary, RAF, 1944.
- <sup>37</sup> *Odette*, film, produced and directed by Herbert Wilcox, starring Anna Neagle and Trevor Howard, 1950.
- <sup>38</sup> *Charlotte Gray*, film, directed by Gillian Armstrong and produced by Sarah Curtis and Douglas Rae, starring Cate Blanchett and Billy Crudup, 2002.
- <sup>39</sup> Escott, p. 211.
- <sup>40</sup> Personal interview with Y. Burney (née Baseden), 11 April 2000.
- <sup>41</sup> Wake, p. 148.
- <sup>42</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 265.
- <sup>43</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 270.
- <sup>44</sup> Personal interview with N. Wake, 28 August 1999.
- <sup>45</sup> Escott, p. 176.
- <sup>46</sup> See C. Stabile, *Feminism and the Technological Fix*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).