

## **Chapter 8**

### **A Queer Thing: The Older Woman Spy**

#### **Rosie White**

The ‘double standard of ageing’ (Sontag, 1973) offers ideal cover for any spy; older women are ignored, perceived as unthreatening and obsolete. Older women who work in espionage can travel below the radar of enemy secret services, as evidenced by the story of a real spy, Melita Norwood, a Soviet agent who was exposed – but not prosecuted – in 1999, after forty years undercover in the British nuclear industries. Norwood was pre-empted by a fictional character. Dorothy Gilman’s popular novels featuring Mrs Emily Pollifax, a retired widow from New Brunswick, New Jersey, present espionage as a logical late-life career choice for any resourceful woman. Connie Sachs in John Le Carré’s Smiley novels has a marginal but pivotal role, while Beryl Reid’s performance in the BBC adaptations offers a powerful vision of an ageing female agent. Academic work on gender and ageing has noted how the process of growing old can be understood in relation to queer theory, unravelling stable notions of selfhood and challenging discourses which present identity as immutable (Sandberg 2008). With reference to these and other examples, this chapter examines the older female spy in conjunction with work on queer identities, proposing that such figures disturb the ontological certainties of Fleming’s famous agent and gesture toward a more productive understanding of ageing femininities.

The older woman spy contradicts many popular stereotypes. In contrast to most fictional representations of the spy, she is not young, active or male. In short, she is not James Bond. Yet there are a number of older women spies in fiction, film and television series who take their narratives in unexpected directions. The ones I examine here are all white, Anglo-American, and ostensibly bourgeois; deviation from standard typologies of espionage narratives is thus limited. As spy fictions necessarily recount the workings of power, this limitation is not too surprising. In fact, as in fiction, the history of ‘the second oldest profession’ offers itself as a map of white power (Knightley 2003).<sup>i</sup> Even the most notorious female spy, Mata Hari, was a white Dutch woman. Margareta Zelle MacLeod was married to a Colonial Army captain and subsequently made a necessary living as a ‘Hindu’ dancer in Paris following their divorce, thus establishing the fictional trope of seductive female spy through many iterations of the ‘Mata Hari’ figure in fiction and film (Wheelwright 1992). Julie Wheelwright’s account of Margareta’s career demonstrates the extent to which espionage in the West is embedded in discourses of class, colonialism and illicit sexuality, all of which conspired to ensure that Mata Hari was sentenced to death in 1917. Subject to the fantasies of her interrogators, as Eva Horn observes, Mata Hari inadvertently confirmed the ‘mass hysteria’ of the day, where a woman had only to slightly diverge from ideals of the properly feminine to be accused of espionage: ‘Spies are suspected everywhere. People amass in groups, manhandle the unfortunate victims, and deliver them to the police [...] hundreds dragged a girl to a policeman because somebody had accused her of being a man in disguise’ (Erich Mühsam 1914, cited in Horn 2013: 170). Margareta Zelle MacLeod was not properly bourgeois or sexually respectable, and the image she had mined for a career onstage as an ‘Eastern’ dancer meant that she was not white enough to survive her trial. The older women spies discussed here are notably distinct from the ‘Mata Hari’ stereotype which continues to haunt women in espionage, as their age seems to remove them from the need to

be sexually available to a male protagonist. Whereas Mata Hari conforms to the fantasy of women spies as *femmes fatales* these older women are more akin to what Eva Horn calls ‘the invisible functionary, the secretary and silent organizer’ (2013:171). Elsbeth Schragmuller was one of most successful ‘functionary’ spies for Germany in World War I; so much so that the French mythologised her as ‘a mixture of cocaine addict and gun-toting dominatrix’ (Horn 2013:194). In a 1936 essay Schragmuller proposed that women had a particular aptitude for espionage:

Structurally the intelligence service presupposes certain psychological components that can be neither learned nor acquired in the pursuit of a given profession. ... Women possess these psychological skills to the same degree as men. It may well be that women, given their more strongly developed emotional constitution, are better equipped in this respect than men, which explains the role they play in the intelligence service. (cited in Horn 2013:194-5)

This chapter addresses the older woman as a queer figure, who disturbs masculine mythologies around espionage and at the same time challenges dominant discourses about ageing femininity. The older woman spy evokes a different account of espionage, ‘queering’ its necessary skills and demonstrating that Bond’s athletic combat is not necessarily the most efficient way of working. In doing so these figures engage with historical and current debates about women in public life, particularly working in professional roles. Although in the UK campaigns around the Gender Pay Gap may have shed light on financial inequities, it does not denote a general improvement. The Fawcett Society’s *Sex and Power 2020* report noted fields which were ‘slipping back and stagnating’, such as the number of women in senior civil service roles, which had decreased from 31% in 2018 to 21% in 2020. No women of colour were employed in such roles. The statistics for public appointments were equally poor:

The Public Appointments Commissioner is responsible for monitoring appointments to numerous arms-length bodies, such as the UK Statistics Authority, the Environment Agency and the Care Quality Commission. These bodies are key players in the way our country is run, yet the latest data from 2018-19 shows that the percentage of chair appointments made to women was just 31%, falling from 44% in 2017-18. (Kaur 2020: 9)

Those negative statistics are echoed in the fictions I discuss in this chapter, where older women are ignored, marginalized and invisible. That invisibility is what enables them to work as such effective spies. Their perspectives from outside the boardroom, beyond the norm and the ‘visibility’ of powerful men, offer an implicit critique of the workings of power. Bodies such as the civil service, the UK Environment Agency and the CQC are implicated in these narratives as organizations which fail to value their female employees, overlooking their skills to the detriment of their own systems.

There is a growing body of academic material on gender and ageing across the humanities and social sciences. In an overview of literary portrayals of ageing for the Cambridge *Introduction to Gerontology* Diana Wallace notes that feminist writing has been quick to engage with ageing, not least because women are more subject to cultural scrutiny: ‘because they live longer and are subject to particularly brutal expectations about youth, beauty and sexuality’ (Wallace 2011: 400). Much of the work on women and ageing begins with reference to Susan Sontag’s essay on ‘The Double Standard of Ageing’, first published in 1972, which has become a foundational text for debate about ageing and gender. In this piece Sontag marks out the ways in which the English-speaking world has constructed ageing women as subject to the double jeopardy of cultural prejudices regarding both gender and old age. Ageing, like all forms of identity, is culturally specific. We are ‘aged by culture’ (Gullette 2004; see also Woodward 1999, 2006). For white middle class women in western Europe and America during the late twentieth century, Sontag proposes that ageing is ‘a moveable doom’ experienced decade by decade after forty (1972: 33). Older women in western culture, she argues, unlike older men, are not afforded respect but rather become subjects of cultural abjection: figures of ridicule and disgust. In a study of jokes about older women Ruth Shade lists pejorative accounts of older women as trivial, invisible, forgetful, mean-spirited, intimidating, toxic, embarrassing, over-talkative, unattractive, sexually

frustrated, undesirable, and both sexually predatory and sexually moribund (Shade 2010:74-78). If postfeminist western media privileges the 'girl' as a sexually attractive and productive figure, the older woman is frequently her abject Other (Wearing 2007). Older women are often represented in popular media as unsexual, asexual or (if sexually active) as ridiculous or disgusting. They tend to be depicted as sexually and professionally redundant and thus unproductive in every sense.

As Sontag argues, the double standard of ageing – that ageing is culturally different for men and women<sup>ii</sup> – is about the double jeopardy of gender and age for the older woman. Femininity alone has its own range of negative stereotypes:

Women are not expected to be truthful, or punctual, or expert in handling and repairing machines, or frugal, or physically brave. They are expected to be second-class adults, whose natural state is that of a grateful dependence on men. And so they often are, since that is what they are brought up to be. So far as women heed the stereotypes of 'feminine' behaviour, they *cannot* behave as fully responsible, independent adults. (Sontag 1972:38)

Aspects of Sontag's analysis continue to resonate with representations of the older woman in the twenty-first century. Adding age to femininity offers additional forms of depreciation:

'The double standard about ageing sets women up as property, as objects whose value depreciates rapidly with the march of the calendar' (Sontag 1972:38). In a postfeminist context such depreciation is allegedly held at bay by representations of women who are shown to be holding back the years by 'successfully' ageing, but only in specific and acceptable ways. Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako note that in contemporary popular film and television it is 'difficult to imagine ageing "successfully" without recourse to youthing [*sic*] and capitalist consumption' (Falcus and Sako 2014:205). Women who do not actively fight the signs of ageing are often consigned to social and cultural invisibility. Such cultural stereotypes, of course, provide a fantastic cover story for any spy.

The double jeopardy of the older woman makes her the perfect secret agent. As Sontag notes, expectations of women's abilities in general – and older women's abilities in

particular – are so low as to offer them a position below the radar of public life. Stereotypical forms of labour done by women, as cleaners, carers or low-status administrators, offer them access to locations where information can be acquired. Horn’s ‘invisible functionary’ from the First World War is the model here: ‘As clerks and secretaries these [women] may have disappeared into the great apparatus, but in fact they regulated access, communication and secrecy’ (Horn 2013: 171,191). The story of Melita Norwood is an example of how femininity can be employed as a cover and also a form of protection. Femininity combined with other derogated forms of identity in the West, such as being working-class, over fifty or not Caucasian, can make women invisible. It can also offer a form of agency, depicted in film and television representations of women spies and assassins, such as *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990). More recently in *Killing Eve* (BBC 2018-2021) Villanelle employs stereotypical roles (waitress, dominatrix, nurse, seductress) in her work as an assassin; another assassin is called the Ghost, because she is an Asian woman who gains access to her targets as a cleaner.

The older women’s *invisibility* is thus a professional advantage should she choose to pursue a career in espionage. Older female spies have the potential to escape scrutiny and punishment by virtue of the very prejudices which Sontag outlines. At the end of her essay Sontag argues that women need to escape those stereotypes of ageing femininity; ‘Women should allow their faces to show the lives they have lived. Women should tell the truth’ (Sontag 1972: 38). The figure of the older female spy – when she appears in the press, in fiction and in popular film and television – embodies a kind of truth by *contradicting* the notion of older women as culturally, physically and professionally redundant. She is a person of interest in this regard. Melita Norwood is one of the most notorious British examples of a successful older woman spy; a Soviet agent whose cover was ‘blown’ in 1999 when she was 87. The then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was told that it was ‘inadvisable’ to prosecute her

(Cunningham 2005). As with any information in the public sphere regarding spies there may be more to this story than the press reports but, at the very least, Norwood's ability to evade prosecution indicates the confusion produced by a spy who is not only female, but also elderly. The consternation expressed by her friends and family following her exposure was reported in her obituary six years later: 'The neighbours were gobsmacked; her daughter expressed amazement; and Norwood, with typical British phlegm, said: "I never considered myself a spy, but it's for others to judge."' Then she politely closed her front door to the media, and Bexleyheath went about its daily business, respecting the privacy of former Agent Hola behind her privet hedge' (Cunningham 2005). Many of the press images from the 1999 story about her career in Soviet espionage depict Norwood in her garden, surrounded by roses. She is represented as very old, very English and very ladylike; an unthreatening, lovely old lady, in suburban retirement. These images, together with the gently humorous comment about the 'privet hedge', call to mind Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, or Ealing comedies such as *The Ladykillers* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1955), where an elderly widow, Mrs Wilberforce (Katie Johnson) inadvertently foils a gang of crooks who raid a security van full of cash. The elderly spy is depicted as a comic anomaly: a harmless eccentric. Yet Norwood had a forty-year career as one of the Soviet Union's most successful agents in the West, easily rivalling the Cambridge spies. As a lowly clerk and secretary at Non-Ferrous Metals, a British company involved in nuclear weapons development, she gained access to government documents which she passed to the KGB in the 1930s. Norwood was open throughout her career regarding her membership of the British Communist Party and had been known to British intelligence since the 1960s. When the press arrived on her doorstep in 1999 Norwood was unrepentant, telling them: 'I would do it again' (*The Telegraph* 2005).

Melita Norwood's career in espionage, like her ability to weather the press storm around her subsequent exposure, was predicated on her age and gender:

When further evidence came to light [regarding Norwood's activities] following [Vasili] Mitrokhin's defection [to the West in 1992], junior MI5 staff decided not to pursue an investigation because it 'might have led to criticism for harassing an old lady', and eventually the law officers too decided not to prosecute. The decision led to an investigation by the Commons Intelligence and Security Committee, which concluded that MI5 had made a series of 'serious failures'. (*The Telegraph* 2005)

Her friends in Bexleyheath were aware of Norwood's political leanings because for many years she had given them copies of the communist newspaper *The Morning Star*, yet her obituaries tend to depict her as eccentric. This is very different from press accounts of Kim Philby or Anthony Blunt who are unequivocally seen as traitors. Norwood's story is marked by the amazement of her neighbours and of the journalists themselves. Who would have thought that a 'little old lady' would do such a thing? Yet the 'little old lady' proves an impenetrable cover story, inspiring a biography and at least one novel based on Melita Norwood's career as a spy (Burke 2008; Rooney 2013).

The Melita Norwood case in 1999 had been anticipated by a fictional depiction of an ageing female spy. Dorothy Gilman published 14 novels featuring Mrs Emily Pollifax, of New Brunswick, New Jersey; the first in 1966 and the last in 2000 (White 2012). In the first novel Mrs Pollifax is a sixty-year-old widow from the suburbs who finds her family and her various hobbies insufficiently rewarding. Following a visit to her doctor, who prescribes antidepressants, Mrs Pollifax volunteers to work for the CIA, pursuing a childhood ambition to become a spy. She becomes a 'walk-in' at Langley, arguing that her age and gender *qualify* her to be a spy:

'I've come to volunteer. I'm quite alone, you see, with no encumbrances or responsibilities. It's true that my only qualifications are those of character, but when you reach my age character is what you have the most of. I've raised two children and run a home. I drive a car and know first aid, I never shrink from the sight of blood and I'm very good in emergencies.'

Mr. Mason looked oddly stricken. He said in a dazed voice, 'But really, you know, spying these days is not bloody at all, Mrs. – Mrs. –'  
'Pollifax,' she reminded him. 'I'm terribly relieved to hear that, Mr. Mason. But still I hoped that you might find use for someone – someone expendable, you know – if only to preserve the lives of your younger, better-trained people. I don't mean to



sound melodramatic, but I am quite prepared to offer you my life or I would not have come.’ (Gilman 1966:8-9)

Emily Pollifax demonstrates the resourcefulness of her age and experience throughout the series. The idea of the older woman spy as a disposable resource, however, indicates a more serious aspect to these comic fictions. While much of the appeal of the Mrs Pollifax novels is the comic anomaly of a ‘little old lady’ and the spy drama, their storylines also address darker aspects of the genre. Mrs Pollifax is tortured and imprisoned during her assignments. She suffers but she also makes unlikely allies, deploying aspects of her age and gender to her advantage. In the exchange above from the first novel in the series Gilman addresses the ‘disposable’ aspect of the elderly head on. If, as Sontag argues, older women are objects of depreciating value, then Mrs Pollifax takes that stereotype and turns it on its head. Disposability becomes Mrs Pollifax’s advantage, her Unique Selling Point both within the narrative as a CIA agent and in the novels as commercial fictions, offering comedy, adventure, romance and a subtly political debate about gender and ageing.

The press accounts of Melita Norwood, like the adventures of Dorothy Gilman’s Mrs Pollifax, thus *queer* popular representations of the spy. They challenge the fantasy of the Bond hero in several ways, most notably by reversing the notion of age as a disadvantage. For Norwood and Pollifax being a ‘little old lady’ is both a cover and a means of access to particular situations, a way of forming unexpected alliances. Because older women are regarded as cultural waste, they are potentially freer to explore different social and geographical territories, deploying the ‘double standard of ageing’ to their advantage. Such figures offer an ironic commentary on the phallacies of Fleming’s hero, indicating the fantasies James Bond plays upon, such as immortal youth, unbounded ability, imperial heritage, and patriarchal supremacy (Bennett and Woollacott 1987; White 2012). Older women spies deliver a view of and from the margins; culturally marginalized by their age and their gender, they are often represented as eccentric, unstable and *queer*.

I am mobilizing the term ‘queer’ in this context as a verb and calling upon a history of critical work in queer theory. To queer something indicates a questioning of the secure division between masculine and feminine, gay and straight, young and old. Queering unsettles categories and reframes debates. From early work in the field, such as Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), queering has been employed to question the security of white, bourgeois, heterosexual identities by interrogating the lapses, elisions and gaps in their construction. This radical potential is paradoxically indebted to a history of homophobia in western culture. In his examination of queer (rather than gay or lesbian) as a category, Warner asserts: ‘The insistence on “queer” – a term initially generated in the context of terror – has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simply intolerance, as the site of violence’ (Warner 1993: xxvi). Queering, in this context, is thus positioned as a means of changing the epistemological standpoint of a debate about identities rather than establishing putative ‘equality’ with a supposed ‘norm’. Where being called ‘queer’ has historically been used as a means of controlling, attacking and denigrating subordinated individuals and groups regarding their gender and sexuality, deploying a queer strategy has the potential to turn the spotlight on those in power and force them to acknowledge their privilege. The older woman spy in fiction, film and television can be a queer agent in this regard.<sup>iii</sup>

Recent work on gender and ageing has begun to argue that ageing is itself a queer process, as time unpicks the security of the self as a person in the world. To become old, to retire, to begin to deal with the physical and emotional shifts that attend ageing, is to confront the mutability of identity, but also to potentially remake it (Sandberg, 2008). This is not a comfortable process, and the association of age and ageing with death and infirmity may explain the discomfort which often shadows representations of older people. It is this very discomfort – the uncanny sense that we recognize our own futures in depictions of ageing –

that makes the older woman in espionage narratives such a compellingly queer figure. She troubles the ontological stability of the 'truth' within such stories. She disrupts certainties, undermines the stability of identity, potentially makes the reader a little uncomfortable.

One notable example of that discomfort is the character of Connie Sachs in John le Carré's Karla novels. Le Carré's famous trilogy, beginning with *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* in 1974, is *about* ageing and growing old. George Smiley is a retired agent called back into the service in order to find a mole at his (unidentified) agency, whose headquarters are known as the Circus. When Oliver Lacon commissions Smiley he asks: 'You'll take the job, clean the stables? Go backwards, go forwards, do whatever is necessary? It's your generation after all. Your legacy.' (le Carré 1974:86). In this passage Smiley is called upon to resolve a problem. Much like the detective protagonist in crime fiction he is required to bring order to a disordered world. Yet he is asked to do so because he represents that older generation of spies that have fostered the problem in the first place; it is his 'legacy'. George Smiley is an ageing agent in the first novel, who continues to age as the series proceeds. Yet while Smiley is a central figure in the novels, we are offered little account of his ageing body.

Instead, much of the shame and abjection of ageing is displaced onto another retired employee of the Circus, Connie Sachs. Smiley goes to visit Connie at her home in Oxford during *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and our first sight of her is written in a notably visceral manner:

The door opened part way, held on a chain; a body swelled into the opening. While Smiley in the same instant gave his whole effort to seeing who else was inside the house, two shrewd eyes, wet like a baby's, appraised him, noted his briefcase and his spattered shoes, flickering upward to peer past his shoulder down the drive, then once more looked him over. Finally the white face broke into a charming smile, and Miss Connie Sachs, formerly queen of research at the Circus, registered her spontaneous joy. [...]

She was a big woman, bigger than Smiley by a head. A tangle of white hair framed her sprawling face. She wore a brown jacket like a blazer and trousers with elastic at the waist and she had a low belly like an old man's. A coke fire smouldered in the grate. Cats lay before it and a mangy grey spaniel, too fat to move, lounged on the

divan. On a trolley were the tins she ate from and the bottles she drank from.  
(le Carré 1974: 112)

Connie is depicted here as an example of dysfunctional ageing. Most notably she is not appropriately heterofeminine. Connie is too tall, her body and clothing disturbingly masculine. Physically and sexually ambivalent, her size and appearance in this passage from the first novel connote the lesbian identity that emerges more explicitly in the third novel of the trilogy, *Smiley's People* (1979). The description rankles with disgust at Connie's age and abject physicality. The 'low belly like an old man's' presents her as outside 'proper' femininity. She is not well-groomed or sculpted by exercise. Her diet of booze and processed foods from tins is unrestrained, just as her domestic surroundings are squalid and unkempt. Connie is emphatically *not* domesticated. Unconcerned with traditional feminine skills such as home-making, her flat is barely functional, with a drinks trolley repurposed as the repository of detritus from her meals. Connie's leaking, unconfined body is beyond age; she has the moist eyes of a child but the sharp observational skills of an experienced agent. The reference to the fat, mangy dog and several cats relates this older woman to the non-human world of beasts.

Much of this description corresponds to the misogyny embedded in what Sontag described as the double standard of ageing: 'The revulsion against ageing in women is the cutting edge of a whole set of oppressive structures (often masked as gallantries) that keep women in their place' (Sontag 1972:38). Above all, Connie does not know her place. This encounter is marked by an incongruously girlish flirtatiousness, as Connie greets Smiley as her 'oldest, oldest lover' and talks about how she 'loved all her gorgeous boys' (le Carré 1974: 112, 127). Geraint D'Arcy argues that 'le Carré allows Sachs to possess a different kind of capital for which she also has no market: her sexuality, a capital which her arthritic body and advanced age renders mostly untradeable' (D'Arcy 2014:284). Yet this is not a straight deal of any kind. Connie appears fully aware of her age and this sexualized language

may be understood as a form of camp banter. She understands her lack of sexual capital and the impact of her ambiguously ageing appearance, but she does not *care*. Instead, the flirtatious language makes fun of Smiley, who is not just her ‘oldest lover’ but her ‘oldest, *oldest* lover’ (my emphasis). Connie and Smiley are colleagues who know each other far too well to misunderstand the joke. They are a dying breed. Compared to most of Smiley’s peers in these novels Connie is exceptional because of her age and gender. She is one of the few women in the profession from that generation. Connie is clearly marked in this passage as inappropriate in her behaviour and in her appearance. She is not respectable, not behaving in a manner which is ‘proper’ to her gender or her age. She drinks, swears, and is rude about the senior officers in the Circus during the ensuing conversation with Smiley. She is too sharp for her own good and she has endured.

Connie Sachs’ memory is central to this first novel in le Carré’s Karla trilogy. As the former ‘queen of research at the Circus’ she is a human archive, the memory of that intelligence community. Connie may be understood as a synecdoche for the thousands of women who have worked in the British secret services since their inception, not as agents but as researchers, administrators, archivists, and typists. Tammy Procter proposes those women’s work as essential to the establishment and maintenance of British intelligence: ‘As clerks, supervisors, report writers, translators, printers, searchers, messengers and historians, women made it possible for a tiny spy-tracking office created in 1909 to become a massive information clearinghouse by the end of the war’ (Procter 2003:53). Connie is also emblematic of what often happens to such women in any large organization. They are kept in the margins in low-paid roles and disposed of when necessary. When she is no longer useful Connie is sacked, told by ‘That personnel cow’ that she has lost her ‘sense of proportion’ (le Carré 1974: 114). Yet Connie’s memory and, by implication, her ‘sense of proportion’, is startlingly accurate. At Smiley’s prompting Connie launches into a lengthy account of an

episode in the history of the Circus, beginning ‘Once upon a time there was a defector called Stanley, way back in sixty-three...’ (le Carré 1974: 115). Her narrative covers twelve pages, peppered with names and dates which she has committed to her archival memory. She tells Smiley how she spotted a double agent, Aleks Polyakov, the Soviet handler for a mole inside the Circus, only to be told ‘to put him out of your silly woman’s mind’, and subsequently sacked (le Carré 1974: 126). Connie’s marginal role within the service gives her a clearer view of what is happening. She has a privileged place in le Carré’s trilogy, queering the authority and power of the Circus’s senior staff, setting the secret service on a kilter and putting their mission in question. She is key to Smiley’s discovery of the mole, thus offering her a significant position as a beacon of truth within the narrative.

Connie Sachs has long been thought to have been based on MI5’s real ‘queen of research’, Milicent Bagot. Bagot was one of the few women to rise from the ranks of the ‘Registry Queens’, MI5’s central records office staffed entirely by women, to become an assistant director (Sisman 2015a): ‘Bagot was also one of the first to raise doubts about Kim Philby. Younger officers were wary of her as a stickler for meticulous office procedure; moreover she was a difficult colleague, whose robust opinions were expressed with passionate conviction. But her memory for facts was so extraordinary as to have passed into office folklore’ (Sisman 2015b:191). Bagot was the first to warn MI5 that Philby had been a member of the Communist Party, a fact he later denied, and that denial was key to exposing him as a Soviet agent (Evans 2006). In le Carré’s authorized biography, he denies that Bagot was the model for Connie, instead naming Diana Mumford, ‘a member of the English ladies’ bridge team who had worked at Bletchley Park’ (Sisman 2015b: 191). Whether we should be convinced by this latter assertion is open to question, as le Carré himself acknowledges: “‘I’m a liar,” he explains. “Born to lying, bred to it, trained to it by an industry that lies for a living, practised in it as a novelist”” (Sisman 2015b: xiv). When Bagot died in 2006 *The*

*Times* headlined the report of her death as ‘le Carré’s “Connie”’: ‘Milicent Bagot, a spinster devoted to her secret work, knew more about the spread of communism than anyone else in MI5, which was why she was thought to be the model for Connie Sachs, the eccentric Soviet expert in *Smiley’s People* and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*’ (Evans 2006). Even these brief descriptions of Bagot’s life indicate a certain uneasiness about a woman in the intelligence services. She is a ‘*spinster* devoted to her secret work’, an ‘*eccentric* Soviet expert’ (my emphases), terms which denote that she was not neatly positioned within a heterosexual matrix; that she somehow did not *fit* despite her expertise and efficiency. The older, senior woman in intelligence, as in any public body, is a queered figure.

Fabio Cleto notes the etymological alignment of queerness and eccentricity – ‘Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character’ – and its relation to camp: ‘The estranging, alienating effect of eccentricity, anticonventionality, or perversion of doxastic prescription links *queer* with its “troubling inauthenticity” – witness the occurrences of *queer money*, “counterfeit money”, at least since 1740 (cf. OED Supplement, 1982, 972)’ (1999:12-13). In le Carré’s novels Connie Sachs embodies all these categories. Her gender and sexuality are disturbingly unbounded and this is translated into her appearances on screen, particularly in the BBC adaptations of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1979) and *Smiley’s People* (1982), where Connie is played by Beryl Reid. The casting of Reid is noteworthy. As a cabaret performer, comedian and character actor, Reid’s career had already encompassed several roles which problematized heterofemininity. Like Milicent Bagot, many obituaries following Beryl Reid’s death in 1996 described her as ‘eccentric’.

Beryl Reid identified as heterosexual but a number of her film and television roles implicitly and explicitly referenced queer sexualities, such as the butch maths mistress in *The Belles of St Trinians* (Frank Launder, 1954). Her performance as June Buckridge in *The Killing of Sister George* (Robert Aldrich, 1968), a grim rendering of an intergenerational

lesbian relationship, was ground-breaking in its explicit representation of queer desires.

Reid's primary work was in character comedy, a tradition in which performers create a character distinct from their own public persona that becomes a self-contained 'act':

It is a formula which permits considerable flexibility ... it can allow the performer to show off a skill or to involve us closely in the fate of a character we come to care about. In fact it can walk on the edge of drama while ensuring that we do not lose sight of the comedian-as-author. This framework makes it possible for a performer to wield unusual power. It emphasizes woman as controller; she does not 'play herself' but creates a multiplicity of selves before the audience – selves which more conventional theatre practices might deny her. (Gray 1994:162)

This tradition lends itself to a queer dynamic that cuts through or exposes social norms and Beryl Reid's work took full advantage of this. In her character comedy work Reid troubled binary understandings of gender and sexuality, deploying costume, regional accents and physical theatre to undercut the naturalization of straight, white, middle-class identity (White 2014). That heritage of queered comedy performance is brought to bear on Reid's role as Connie Sachs in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (BBC 1979).

Reid plays Sachs as full of anger and sentiment. Unlike George Smiley (Alec Guinness), who remains impassive and largely unreadable throughout this series and the BBC's adaptation of *Smiley's People*, Connie is a leaky parcel of nostalgia, despair and rage. The television series transposes phrases from le Carré's work into Reid and Guinness's script. While Reid is slighter and smaller than le Carré's description of Connie Sachs, the costume, make-up and setting all closely follow the novel. As in the novel, Sachs is the sharp and winsome human archive of the circus, narrating how she spotted Polyakov and watched him for eight years before being sacked. This scene was filmed over two days on location in a house in Oxford, then reshot following technical problems with the footage. The director, John Irvin, suggested that Reid emphasize Sachs' bitterness and Reid was nominated for a BAFTA for her performance (Reid 1984:230-232). Smiley is shown arriving in Oxford and walking through a snowy university quad before heading out to the suburbs where Sachs lives



in a grubby bedsit. Day turns to night during his journey. Even in daylight the landscape is drained of colour, almost monotone, while Sachs' room is furnished in dull shades of grey and brown. The sequence draws upon *film noir*, employing shadows which stretch across the protagonists' faces, the camera moving closer in as their conversation proceeds. Joseph Oldham notes how *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* was part of a burgeoning tradition of quality British television drama and the first of such series to be entirely shot on film (2013: 732). The literal and metaphorical darkness of *noir* cinema is called upon in this sequence, as is that genre's predilection for claustrophobia, the camera showing little of the setting but zooming in on Connie's face. If Reid plays Sachs as weepy and emotional, she also demonstrates Sachs' archival memory and sharp wit. The visual aesthetic implies that there is more going on beneath the surface. Towards the end of the sequence Reid launches into a final speech about Sachs' 'lovely boys' as the camera focuses unmercifully on her pale and aged face: 'Hey ho, halcyon days [...] Poor loves, trained to empire, trained to rule the waves. Englishmen could be proud then. They could, George. All gone, taken away. Bye-bye world. If it's bad George don't come back – promise? I want to remember you just as you were. My lovely, lovely boys – promise?' As the speech begins Sachs is drunk and tearful; by the end George has already closed the door behind him and she is alone. The extreme close-up reveals every wrinkle; after she has spoken Reid turns her head away and bites her lip, as if regretting what she has said. Although this scene is full of pathos and regret, Sachs appears fragile but unbowed. Reid seems older than Guinness in this sequence (she was in fact five years his junior), and the close-ups emphasize this. Reid worked on her performance to replicate Connie's arthritic hands and clumsy movements (Reid 1984:230). If Smiley is retired, Connie in this sequence is *aged*, with all the infirmities that presage an early death. Her tears, her anger, her dislike of 'the real world', position Connie as abject in her queered, ageing femininity.

All of this could connote a stereotype; the monstrous old woman, subject to the ‘double standard of ageing’. Yet in Le Carre’s fictions and the BBC adaptations Connie is not demonized, derogated or ignored. Certainly, the novels and adaptations depict her as sentimental, nostalgic, enraged, and even pathetic. Her abjection may be understood as representing a more critical view of the British intelligence agencies. In the BBC’s adaptation of *Smiley’s People* (1982) Smiley once more seeks out Connie Sachs for her memory, but this time the exchange has a different tone. Sachs is dying, only able to move with a walking frame and even more crippled by arthritis. She has moved out of Oxford and lives in the Oxfordshire countryside with a younger woman, echoing Reid’s earlier role in *The Killing of Sister George*. The adaptation once again closely follows le Carré’s novel; indeed, le Carré rewrote the script for *Smiley’s People* after the original version was deemed unsatisfactory (Oldham 2013:733). Connie and her partner, Hilary – also a former Circus employee – run a kennels and animal refuge: ‘Merrilee Boarding. All pets welcome. Eggs!’ Their eccentric rural idyll is interrupted by Smiley’s visit. Once again, he arrives at dusk and, as they talk, the night draws in. This time Connie has a more comfortable home and a partner who cares for her. In the novel their home is chaotic:

For an office, they had the roll-top desk laden with bills and flea powder; for a bedroom the brass double bedstead with its heap of stuffed toy animals lying like dead soldiers between the pillows; for a drawing-room Connie’s rocking-chair and a crumbling wicker sofa; for a kitchen a gas ring fired from a cylinder; and for decoration the unclearable litter of old age. (le Carré 1979:218)

The set of the television adaptation is equally chaotic but also comfortable; there is a roaring fire with an oil painting above it and while the house is messy it is clearly a refuge not just for the animals but also for Connie and Hilary. Reid plays Connie Sachs in *Smiley’s People* as a stronger figure. She is less tearful and more adversarial. Connie is less nostalgic in this second series, urging Guinness’s Smiley to let the past go. Smiley harangues Sachs to get the information he needs, telling her to ‘Wake up and be useful!’ The television series, like the

novel, demonstrates how Smiley is driven by his obsession with finding his Soviet adversary, Karla, to the extent that he is willing to sacrifice his ethics. This makes it all the more significant that, as an emblematic figure for older women in professional and public life, Connie expresses her distress and is vindicated. Connie Sachs is an outsider, but her point of view is privileged. She is the oracle who tells Smiley the truth, or at least supplies him with information that leads him to the truth. Reading these narratives through Connie Sachs gives spy fiction a fascinating spin.

Le Carré's novels and the BBC adaptations offer very different accounts of ageing through Smiley and Connie. Smiley is a prime example of 'successful ageing', a term attributed to the work of Jon Rowe and Robert Kahn (1987). Rowe and Kahn define 'successful ageing' as avoiding illness, remaining physically fit and socially engaged (1987; see also Sandberg 2008:120-121). The idea of 'successful ageing' has been critiqued for its alignment with neoliberal discourses of the self-sufficient social subject; it is applicable primarily to a white, middle-class consumer. Successful ageing in these terms means *not ageing* as far as is humanly possible, remaining 'youthful', able-bodied, not being a burden on the state. 'Successful ageing' is what many western governments are now investing in, as are some private multinationals, as a means of keeping us functioning as consumers well into later life (Sandberg 2008:122-127). Smiley exemplifies 'successful ageing' because he appears largely untouched by age. He is active, able-bodied and a dedicated public servant. Connie is evidently less 'successful'. In the BBC's 1982 adaptation of *Smiley's People*, as in the novel, she is clear about her decline: 'It's death, that's what I'm suffering from.' More than this, Connie is *defiantly* unsuccessful at ageing. She refuses to carefully maintain her body and her home. She voices the truth about ageing; that it is not always pleasant or easy and that death is the only endgame. In embracing disreputable old age, Connie exposes the limited scope of 'successful ageing' and its relation to a history of western capital (Shildrick

2015). For women, 'successful ageing' means assuming the role of a little old lady and effectively disappearing, not taking up too much space and time, being quiet, dressing 'appropriately'. Connie refuses this. She holds the knowledge that Smiley needs and speaks from a position outside the Circus. Connie Sachs represents an eccentric, queered alternative to 'successful ageing' in her Oxfordshire 'dacha' where 'all pets [are] welcome without discrimination' (le Carré 1979:216). Connie's failure to age 'successfully' indicates a different perspective on femininity and ageing.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* Judith Halberstam proposes: 'We can ... recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique' (2011:88). Halberstam's 'queer art of failure' posits an alternate regime of resistance and survival on the margins, which seems an uncannily accurate account of Connie Sachs' role in the le Carré novels. More than a single instance of an eccentric character who offers a queered world view, however, Connie's failing old age represents a radically critical reading of spy fictions. Connie correctly names the executive of the Circus as inhuman and inefficient. If intelligence agencies represent the state bodies they serve this offers a trenchant commentary on the workings of power. Like her factual and fictional peers, Melita Norwood and Emily Pollifax, Connie Sachs represents a different kind of secret agent. The older woman spy in this regard may be understood as a critical catalyst in the espionage narrative, questioning the corporate ethics of intelligence and exposing the intersectional absences in neoliberal discourses of 'successful ageing'.

Reading espionage fictions from the perspective of these older female characters, whether they are protagonists or marginal figures, demonstrates the limitations of hegemonic white masculinities which Western espionage narratives have predominantly offered. Such fantasies are at the centre of Fleming's Bond novels and their cinematic adaptations. Like Bond himself, those film franchises promote excessive consumerism through dreams of

omnipotence. Viewing such narratives from the standpoint of women like Mrs Pollifax and Connie Sachs raises larger questions about the ethics of such phallogentric fantasies in the twenty-first century. As we emerge – hopefully – from the ravages of a global pandemic and begin – hopefully – to take responsibility for the damage we are doing to our planet, these fantasies are unsustainable. The emotional intelligence, vulnerability and ethics of care that inform the older women spies discussed in this chapter could offer a more productive and sustainable future.

### **Postscript**

During the process of writing and revising this chapter a British intelligence agent and former Director General of MI5, has been lurking in the background. Stella Rimington was the first woman to command a major intelligence service in the UK. Her professional background in archives and libraries links her to the ‘invisible functionary, the secretary and the silent organizer’ – women like Milicent Bagot and to the fictional Connie Sachs – but she has been far more successful than that model (Horn 2013: 171). I would not categorize Rimington as a ‘queered’ figure, other than in terms of her exceptional status as a woman in such a senior position. Unlike Connie, and perhaps Milicent Bagot, Stella Rimington was fully incorporated into the British secret service; one of her roles was to identify ‘subversion’ within government organizations such as the British Civil Service. Rimington, then a senior MI5 officer, was part of a 1980s inter-departmental group addressing Subversion in Public Life, drawing up a secret blacklist of civil servants, including teachers, under Margaret Thatcher’s government. People who were identified as ‘subversives’, such as those involved in the Trotskyist group Militant Tendency, were denied promotion, or covertly moved to roles where they could cause the least disruption (Cobain 2018). Stella Rimington’s time as Director General in the early 1990s shifted the image of MI5 as she ‘instituted a policy of greater public openness’, including releasing some files to the National Archives at Kew

(<https://www.mi5.gov.uk/dame-stella-rimington>). This may be understood as a strategic move by MI5 to represent itself as democratic, modern and egalitarian. Rimington's autobiography, chimes with this ethos, significantly titled *Open Secret* (2001). It is a carefully edited version of her life. Stella Rimington has had a remarkable career, moving up from the ranks through MI5 in an era when women's work in any profession was far from easy. My question would be what 'service' means in this context. Like the Civil Service, Britain's secret services are represented as serving the national good, yet both bodies necessarily serve the government in power. Documents made available at Kew in 2014 raise difficult questions about MI5's role in the miners' strikes of the 1980s (Travis 2014). Serving a government which facilitated neoliberal economic and social policies demonstrates the extent to which such bodies enabled a regime whose effects continue to resonate in British social and political life.

In a waspish review of Rimington's autobiography David Rose notes the omission of details about the Melita Norwood case, where questions were asked about MI5's failure to recognise the Soviet spy: 'When Rimington gave her evidence, in camera, to an inquiry into the affair by the Parliamentary Intelligence Oversight Committee, she said she could not remember what she had been told about Norwood, and could not explain her service's inaction. In fact, she was briefed extensively, six years before the story surfaced' (Rose 2001).

As a result of her evidence Rimington's successor took the blame for that failure. Rose also argues that Rimington's claim to have changed the culture within MI5 was not entirely accurate:

Rimington claims, more or less singlehandedly, to have transformed a bastion of brutal sexism into one of political correctness. It is an account bitterly disputed by some of her female colleagues, who say they remember a woman principally devoted to personal advancement, who did little to foster other women's careers. While nearly half of MI5's staff are women, there are still very few in senior grades, and their numbers reflect average proportions in Whitehall as a whole. (Rose 2001)

If we take these accounts of Rimington at face value, she represents the opposite of older women discussed in this chapter. Rather than the productive ‘failure’ of Connie Sachs, which is ‘a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power’, Stella Rimington represents ‘success’ (Halberstam 2011: 88). In her ‘service’ she enables neoliberal capitalism, without critique or contradiction. Rimington’s successful intelligence career, and subsequent success as an author, raises questions about what such ‘success’ entails, and at what cost?

Professional success in neoliberal times is predicated on subjects ‘constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising’ individuals (Gill and Scharff 2011:5). These are the fantasies that underpin James Bond; an *Übermensch* dedicated to a notionally benevolent and moral state. The reality is far less noble; neoliberal feminism as espoused by ‘successful’ women in senior roles, such as Sheryl Sandberg, advocates ‘an individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology that is complicit with rather than critical of capitalism’ (Gill 2016:617). William Boyd’s *Restless* (2006) offers a more critical account of ‘success’ in the secret services, recounting the story of Eva Delectorskaya, an aging female spy who has lived a life undercover after being betrayed by a double agent during WW2. Boyd places Eva’s narrative alongside that of her daughter, Ruth, as they track down the intelligence officer who betrayed her, now a pillar of the British establishment. Ruth is engaged in left politics and encounters the murky workings of intelligence agents infiltrating radical movements in the 1970s. This story is critical of the state and its machinations, encouraging the reader to consider the cost of international politics, particularly for women. It demonstrates the love and trust between Ruth and her mother, despite the years of lies that ensured Eva’s safety. Ruth worries about her mother, observing her constant watchfulness, waiting for the enemy to come for her: ‘you don’t need to have been a spy, I thought, to feel like this’ (Boyd 2006: 324-325). Ruth and Eva’s narratives interrogate the role of government agencies; how they can inadvertently destroy some people, often women, while rewarding others, mostly men,

who play the game. And here we are, living through a global pandemic, war in Europe and an economic crisis. Perhaps it is time to think differently about what we see as a ‘successful’ individual, or intelligence agency, or governing body.

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<sup>i</sup> The espionage work of women of colour has only recently been acknowledged, as in the case of Noor Inayat Khan, who worked under the codename 'Madeleine' for the SOE in occupied France during World War II (Dalton 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Sontag does not address other forms of difference, such as race, class and sexuality, in this essay.

<sup>iii</sup> It is worth noting that while Erin G Carlston (2013) argues that gay men, Jewishness and communism are culturally aligned in Western notions of the double agent, none of the factual or fictional older women spies I address in this chapter are double agents.